

DECEMBER 2009

Asimov's SCIENCE FICTION®

**Nick Wolven
Angie's
Errand**

**Sara Genge
Mike Resnick
John Shirley
Brian Stableford**

**Jeff Carlson
A Lovely Little
Christmas Fire**

\$4.99

12



www.asimovs.com



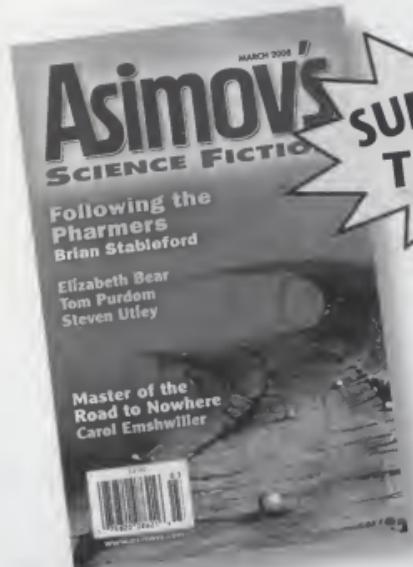
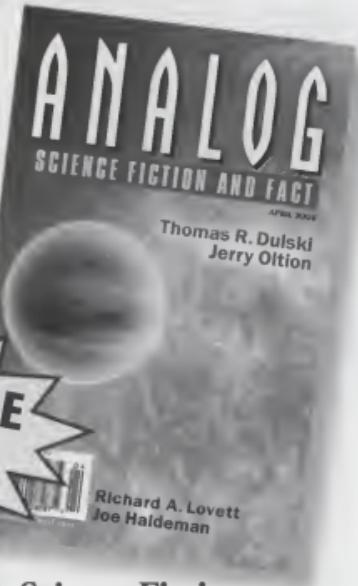
DON'T MISS AN ISSUE!

Subscribe today and have every intriguing issue of entertaining science fiction delivered direct to your door!

Analog Science Fiction and Fact

An unbeatable combination of stimulating fiction stories, provocative editorials, and fascinating articles, all solidly rooted in science fact. 1 year (12 issues*), just \$32.97!

Visit www.analogsf.com →



**SUBSCRIBE
TODAY!**

Asimov's Science Fiction

Novellas and short stories from the leading science fiction and fantasy writers. Plus candid, no-holds-barred book reviews and guest editorials.

1 year (12 issues*), just \$32.97!

← Visit www.asimovs.com

To order by charge card, call
TOLL-FREE: 1-800-220-7443 (8am – 7pm EST)

or mail your name, address, order, and payment to:

Dell Magazines Direct
6 Prowitt St., Suite S • Norwalk, CT 06855-1220

Please allow 6-8 weeks for delivery of your first issue. **Outside U.S.A.:** Add \$1 per issue (U.S. funds) for shipping and handling. **WA residents:** Add state and local taxes to your total order. *We publish double issues twice a year which count as four issues toward your subscription.

Offer expires 12/31/10.

79L-NSFSLL

GREAT GIFTS FOR READERS!



Delight every reader on your list with a gift subscription to *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine* or *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine*.

You won't believe the thanks you'll get – and we take care of everything. We'll send a gift announcement to your recipient, followed by an entire year of suspense-filled mystery reading, all for just \$29.97 per title.

Order today, then sit back and relax; your holiday shopping is done!

Charge your order by calling toll-free 1-800-220-7443

Mail to: Dell Magazines, Suite S, 6 Prowitt Street, Norwalk, CT 06855-1220

YES! Start a gift subscription as indicated below.

Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine (AHM)

1 year, 10 issues (including 2 double issues), \$29.97

Ellery Queen Mystery Magazine (EQM)

1 year, 10 issues (including 2 double issues), \$29.97

Method of payment:

Enclosed is my check or money order for

\$ _____ (U.S. funds).

Charge my: VISA / MC / AMEX

Card number _____

Expiration date _____

Cardholder's signature _____

Your name _____

Address _____

City _____

State _____ ZIP _____

Send gift to _____

Title _____

Address _____

City _____

State _____ ZIP _____

For additional gifts, please use a separate piece of paper. Allow 8 weeks for delivery of first issue. For delivery outside the USA: Add \$1.00 per issue (U.S. funds). Offer expires 7/31/10. **NMHMA9**

Asimov's® SCIENCE FICTION

DECEMBER 2009

Vol. 33 No. 12 (Whole Number 407)

Next Issue on Sale November 10, 2009

Cover Art by Duncan Long

NOVELETTES

66 A LARGE BUCKET, AND ACCIDENTAL
GODLIKE MASTERY OF SPACETIME BENJAMIN CROWELL
88 SOME LIKE IT HOT BRIAN STABLEFORD

SHORT STORIES

10 A LOVELY LITTLE CHRISTMAS FIRE JEFF CARLSON
24 AS WOMEN FIGHT SARA GENGE
34 ANIMUS RIGHTS JOHN SHIRLEY
44 ANGIE'S ERRAND NICK WOLVEN
56 LEAVING THE STATION JIM AIKIN
80 THE BRIDE OF FRANKENSTEIN MIKE RESNICK

POETRY

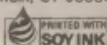
23 THE ANTI-WORLD ANDREW GUDGEL
55 THE WORLD'S ENDING
AGAIN IN 2012 DARRELL SCHWEITZER
79 SHINER G.O. CLARK

DEPARTMENTS

4 EDITORIAL: ALL AROUND THE TOWN SHEILA WILLIAMS
6 REFLECTIONS: BUILDING WORLDS:
PART III ROBERT SILVERBERG
87 NEXT ISSUE
107 ON BOOKS PETER HECK
112 THE SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR ERWIN S. STRAUSS

Asimov's Science Fiction, ISSN 1065-2698, Vol. 33, No.12. Whole No. 407, December 2009. GST #R123293128. Published monthly except for two combined double issues in April/May and October/November by Dell Magazines, a division of Crosstown Publications. One year subscription \$55.90 in the United States and U.S. possessions. In all other countries \$65.90 (GST included in Canada), payable in advance in U.S. funds. Address for subscription and all other correspondence about them, 6 Prowitt Street, Norwalk, CT 06855. Allow 6 to 8 weeks for change of address. Address for all editorial matters: Asimov's Science Fiction, 475 Park Avenue South, New York, N.Y. 10016. Asimov's Science Fiction is the registered trademark of Dell Magazines, a division of Crosstown Publications. © 2009 by Dell Magazines, a division of Crosstown Publications, 6 Prowitt Street, Norwalk, CT 06855. All rights reserved, printed in the U.S.A. Protection secured under the Universal and Pan American Copyright Conventions. Reproduction or use of editorial or pictorial content in any manner without express permission is prohibited. All submissions must include a self-addressed, stamped envelope; the publisher assumes no responsibility for unsolicited manuscripts. Periodical postage paid at Norwalk, CT and additional mailing offices. POSTMASTER, send change of address to Asimov's Science Fiction, 6 Prowitt Street, Norwalk, CT 06855. In Canada return to Quebecor St. Jean, 800 Blvd. Industrial, St. Jean, Quebec J3B 8G4.

Printed in CANADA

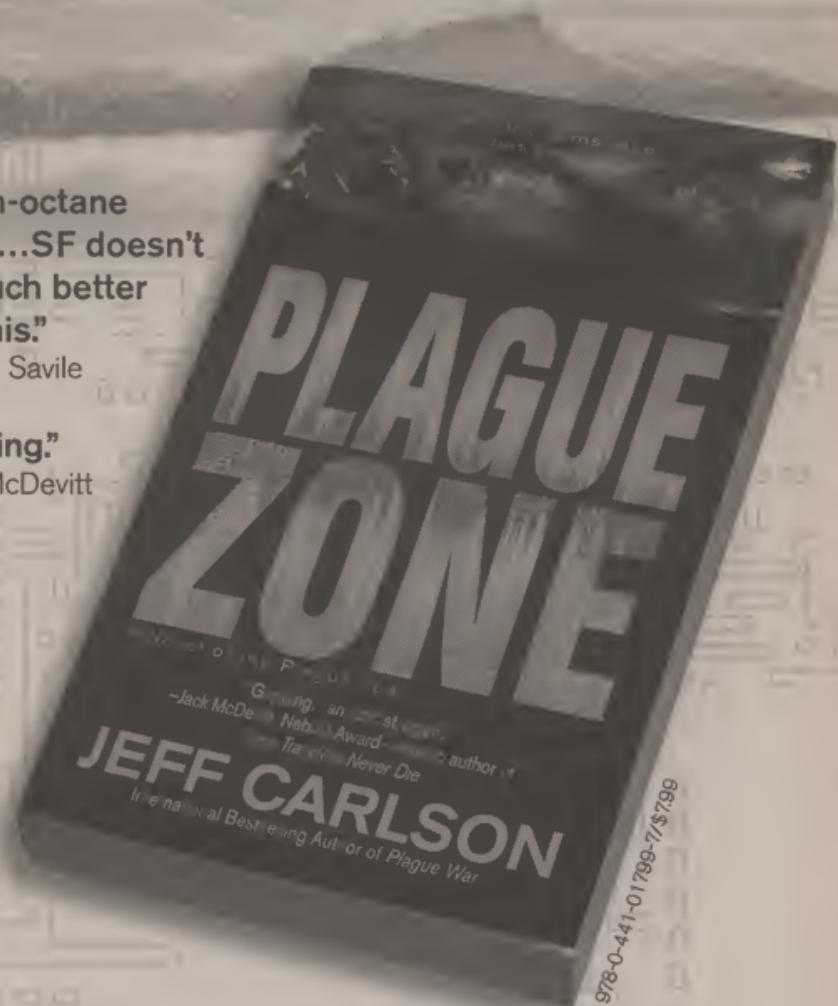


They survived the machine plague,
but what's to come could be much worse...

"A high-octane
thriller...SF doesn't
get much better
than this."

—Steven Savile

"Gripping."
—Jack McDevitt



After surviving the machine plague and the world war
that followed, nanotech researcher Ruth Goldman
and ex-army ranger Cam Najarro have discovered that
a new contagion is about to be unleashed.



From Ace
ACE A Member of Penguin Group (USA)

jverse.com
penguin.com

ALL AROUND THE TOWN

A tour that maps the movement of *Asimov's Science Fiction* magazine's New York offices is a journey through Manhattan's historic business districts. The excursion ranges from the East side to the West side. It gets into the fifties and ends up at our newest digs near the Brooklyn Bridge.

The only office I never set foot in was the first one. Near 18th Street, 267 Park Avenue South was the headquarters for Davis Publications. The offices were just up the street from Union Square and not far from New York's famous Flatiron Building. When he founded *Asimov's*, Joel Davis was already the publisher of *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine*. Apparently the built-in bookshelves in the office were all specially constructed for it and other periodicals. The wooden shelves were painted white, and made to house digest-sized magazines. One case was even designed specifically to hold unsolicited manuscripts. Although no one from those old offices remains with the magazines, those bookshelves have accompanied us to all our subsequent locations.

In 1978, Davis Publications moved into the Chanin Building at 380 Lexington Avenue. This elegant art-deco edifice was the tallest building in New York City when it was erected in 1929. Too soon, the building's height was eclipsed by its more famous cousin—the Chrysler Building—which happens to stand kitty-corner to it. When I went to work for Davis Publications in December 1981, the lobby was looking a little tarnished. Indeed, all of New York seemed to have an air of faded gentility. The windows in Grand Central Terminal across the street had been painted black during the Second World War to protect the station and the city from bombing raids. They stayed that way until 1988. Restoration began on both structures late in that

decade. Once the true grandeur of the pre-war train station and the sumptuousness of the Chanin Building's lobby were revealed, I often wondered what I'd done to deserve such beauty in my life.

During the ten years that I worked for Joel Davis (and the one extra year that we stayed in the building after the fiction digests were sold to Bertelsmann Media and merged with Dell Magazines), I inhabited seven different rooms on two separate floors. Various office mates included the editorial assistants of *Alfred Hitchcock* and *Ellery Queen Mystery Magazines*, *Sylvia Porter's Personal Finance Magazine*, and *Analog*, as well as Shawna McCarthy and Gardner Dozois, two former editors of *Asimov's*. Neither the editors nor I had offices to ourselves until we were sold to Bertelsmann. With all those moves we learned to travel light, but we still managed to amass a huge number of files and back issues of the magazines.

Our new owners brought us a new publisher, an Austrian named Chris Haas-Heye. As he readied us for the oncoming move, he constantly urged us to "divest, divest, divest" of all unnecessary papers, files, and magazines. Historians may weep, but we were several tons lighter when we took up residence at the very first tenants in the brand new Bertelsmann Building located at 1540 Broadway.

The Bertelsmann Building is in the heart of Times Square. Although it was an exciting place to work, it wasn't the shiny Times Square that we know today. While I could approach the building from several directions, there was only one circuitous route that didn't take me past a sex shop. This was in contrast to the desolate theater a couple of blocks away that was home only to a gentleman with a megaphone who relentlessly informed us that we were all headed for eternal damnation. While those shops are long

gone and the theater now houses *The Lion King*, we too moved on around 1997, several months after Dell Magazines was sold to Penny Publications.

Our travels took us to Rockefeller Center and the same building that houses Radio City Music Hall. A lovely perk was the annual summer notification of eligibility for discounted tickets to the Christmas Spectacular. Due to complicated reasons and good fortune, I found I had an enormous corner office to myself. (Gardner Dozois always wanted to know where I planned to put the swimming pool.)

Alas, such luxuries were relatively short lived. In 1999, we were packed off to Park Avenue South, not far from the Empire State Building. Although ten blocks south, it felt a bit like a return to our old Chanin neighborhood. Restaurants, which are a bit overpriced in tourist areas like Times Square and Rockefeller Center, were more economical and diverse. My daily walk across town from Penn Station took me through Little Korea, and we were only a few blocks north of an area that is densely packed with Indian restaurants and grocery stores.

Now we are moving once again—this time to a beautiful location in an older part of the city. Once again, we've been divesting ourselves of files and magazines. Masses of issues and anthologies have been shipped off to Walter Reed Hospital, the USO, schools, and science fiction conventions. We'll arrive at 267 Broadway a leaner and meaner machine. The frenzied cleaning has already unearthed my college correspondence with Rod Serling that had been missing for years and letters from Arthur Clarke I didn't know I'd lost. The new office overlooks the park around City Hall. For the first time, I'll be in a workplace where the streets are named instead of numbered. Since the island of Manhattan narrows there, and the office is close to many subways, I don't expect to get too lost. It's not far from Wall Street and the South Street Sea Port and it's only half a mile from my hairdresser's salon in Chinatown. As I approach the latest stop on the *Asimov's* tour, I can't wait to begin exploring some more sidewalks of New York. ○

Asimov's®

SCIENCE FICTION

SHEILA WILLIAMS
Editor

BRIAN BIENIOWSKI
Managing Editor

MARY GRANT
Editorial Assistant

VICTORIA GREEN
Senior Art Director

LYNDA MEEK
Production Artist

CAROLE DIXON
Senior Production Manager

EVIRA MATOS
Production Associate

ABIGAIL BROWNING
Manager Subsidiary Rights and Marketing

BRUCE W. SHERBOW
Senior Vice President, Sales and Marketing

SANDY MARLOWE
Circulation Services

JULIA McEVOY
Manager, Advertising Sales

ADVERTISING REPRESENTATIVE
ROBIN DIMEGLIO

Advertising Sales Manager
Tel: (203) 866-6688 Fax: (203) 854-5962
printadvertising@dellmagazines.com
(Display and Classified Advertising)

PETER KANTER
Publisher

CHRISTINE BEGLEY
Vice President, Editorial and Product Development

SUSAN KENDRIOSKI
Vice President, Design and Production

Stories from *Asimov's* have won 44 Hugos and 25 Nebula Awards, and our editors have received 18 Hugo Awards for Best Editor.

Please do not send us your manuscript until you've gotten a copy of our manuscript guidelines. To obtain this, send us a self-addressed, stamped business-size envelope (what stationery stores call a number 10 envelope), and a note requesting this information. Please write "manuscript guidelines" in the bottom left-hand corner of the outside envelope. The address for this and for all editorial correspondence is *Asimov's Science Fiction*, 267 Broadway, Fourth Floor, New York, NY 10007-2352. While we're always looking for new writers, please, in the interest of time-saving, find out what we're looking for, and how to prepare it, before submitting your story.

BUILDING WORLDS: PART III

My last two columns have been devoted to a basic aspect of writing science fiction: the designing of planets. In the first column I talked about ways to achieve scientific plausibility; in the second, I described how I had conceived and developed the specs for my own best-known world, the Majipoor of *Lord Valentine's Castle*. I want to go on now to discuss how I invented my characters and the social matrix in which their lives would be lived.

I told last time of how Majipoor was ruled by a dual monarchy: a senior king, the Pontifex, and his junior companion, the Coronal. Upon the death of a Pontifex his Coronal succeeds to that title and chooses a new Coronal of his own. Thus the monarchy is an adoptive one, rather like what evolved in Rome in the time of the Emperors Trajan, Hadrian, and Antoninus Pius.

The protagonist of the book I was constructing would be the Coronal Lord Valentine, cast from his throne by a usurper, robbed of his memory, and set loose to wander. A useful archetype: I find in my files a note that reads, "Valentine as Grail Knight—Perfect Fool—born ignorant and learns gradually." And again: "A hero suffers, comes to power as the regenerator of the world." And my own final comment: "Valentine is an amiable & sunny man, though no simpleton, and people are naturally drawn to him."

Suddenly I had a name for my planet: *Majipoor*, "maji" providing a subliminal hint of the romantic word "magic" and the Hindi-sounding suffix "-poor" to remind me that my geographic model was the subcontinent of India blown up to superplanetary size.

Next in the gradually cohering plot came this: "Since Valentine is adopted, who is his true mother? Is she capable of

detecting the impostor? (Or identifying the concealed ruler?)—She is a priestess on an island in a remote sea." And I put a large island between the two main continents and made it a ritual center where the Great Mother rules.

But there was still no hint of the conflict that every novel needs, other than the as yet unexplained usurpation that had sent Valentine into exile. Some sort of sinister player was needed. I jotted down this: "The King of Dreams is the dark adversary of the Emperor." A second telepathic force, this one far more stern and ominous than the benevolent Lady of the Isle: a sender of bad dreams, a planetary superego ferociously chastising those who get out of line, but also—so I realized—capable of getting out of line himself. The King of Dreams would turn out, in fact, to be connected in some way with the mysterious usurpation that thrusts Valentine from his throne. I put his headquarters on an inhospitable desert continent and made him an equal partner in the government with the Pontifex, the Coronal, and the Lady.

My sheets of preliminary notes now fill up with all manner of archetypical references out of our own history, literature, and myth: "Falstaff . . . the Malcontent figure . . . Tiberius . . . Caligula . . . Aeneas and the descent into hell . . . Merlin/Hermes . . . Shapeshifters . . . Jonah in the Whale . . . Darth Vader . . . Jason and the Fleece . . ." All of these, and many more, would find their way in transmuted form into the plot of *Lord Valentine's Castle*.

After a few weeks I was ready to set down a formal sketch of the book. It began with a statement of the general background:

This long picaresque adventure—the manuscript will probably run six hundred pages—takes place on the huge

world of Majipoor, a planet enormously bigger than Earth, but lacking most of the heavier elements, so that the gravity is only about three-fourths that of Earth. All is airy and light on Majipoor: it is a cheerful and playful place in general, although highly urbanized, bearing a population of many billions. Food is abundant, the air is fresh, the streams and oceans are clean. Majipoor was settled by colonists from Earth some fourteen thousand years ago, but also is occupied peacefully by representatives of six or seven of the galaxy's other intelligent species, as well as the descendants of Majipoor's own native race, humanoid in form, capable of physical changes of shape. These last beings are regarded with some uneasiness by the others, and this uneasiness is reciprocated.

Across the vastness of Majipoor's three colossal continents is spread an incredible diversity of cities, glittering and majestic, separated by parks, agricultural territories, forest preserves, wastelands kept deliberately barren as boundaries, and holy districts occupied by religious devotees. Such a gigantic cosmos of a planet can hardly be efficiently governed by one central authority, and yet a central authority does exist, to which all local governors do indeed pay lip-service and on occasion direct homage. This central authority is the Pontifex, an imperial figure, aloof and virtually unknowable. . . .

The outline goes on to sketch the plot—Valentine's amnesia, and his attempt to regain his throne—and announces that “the form of the novel is a gigantic odyssey, divided into five ‘books’ of thirty-five to forty thousand words each, during which the deposed Lord Valentine learns of his true identity, gradually and at first reluctantly resolves to regain his power, seeks successfully to obtain access to his original personality and memories, and crosses all of immense Majipoor, enlisting allies as he goes, engaging in strange and colorful adventures, finally to confront the usurper at the Castle.”

Now the main structure was in place, and I knew from past experience that I

would be able to fill in necessary connective matter—minor characters, subplots, internal surprises—as I went along. What remained was to move Valentine across Majipoor from the west coast of the secondary continent to the heart of the primary one and up the slopes of thirty-mile-high Castle Mount, inventing the details of the terrain as I went. And it was those details that I hoped would set my novel apart from its predecessors in the genre.

In designing Majipoor I wanted it to be as realistic, in its fantastic way, as I could make it. Here I drew on my strong suits: my knowledge of geography, archaeology, and natural history. Beginning with the city of Pidruid on the wilder continent's northwest coast and going eastward, I invented an appropriate climate, a cuisine, an assortment of native wildlife, and—a matter of particular interest and amusement for me—a botanical background. All of these were, of course, derived in one fashion or another from terrestrial models; I don't believe that we science fictionists can ever really invent anything from scratch, but only make modifications of existing prototypes. The more familiar you are with a broad array of prototypes, the richer the variations you can ring on them; but true invention, I think, is Nature's own prerogative, and variations on existing themes is the best we can manage.

I managed pretty well, I feel. In my garden are many of the plants known as bromeliads, which usually have rosettes with a cup in the center to hold a reservoir of water. Insects and plant matter fall into the cup and decay to provide nutrients for the bromeliad. Fine: I brought Valentine into a grove of “mouthplants,” stemless plants much like my bromeliads, except that their leaves are nine feet long and the central cups have paired grinders equipped with blades. The mouthplants are, in fact, carnivorous, grabbing their prey with hidden tendrils and conveying it to the cups to be chewed. There are, praise be, no such lovelies on our own world; but it was easy

enough for me to dream them up for Majipoor.

So I populated the forests and waters of Majipoor: with sea-dragons like great plesiosaurs, with balloon-shaped submarine monsters, with glassy-fronded ferns that emitted piercing discordant sounds, and—one of my favorites—trees whose trunks begin to atrophy with age and whose limbs inflate, until eventually their trunks are mere guy-ropes that break at maturity, setting the limbs adrift like balloons to drift off and start new colonies elsewhere. All these things have models in real natural history, but I think I did a pretty fair job of extending and transforming those models to produce the distinctive flora and fauna of Majipoor.

The terrain, too—forests and jungles, mountains, rivers, a formidable desert, the mighty thrust of Castle Mount—came alive because I was working from life, depicting with appropriate variations things I had seen myself, altering colors, shapes, forms, greatly expanding the scale of everything, making it all more magical (though the originals are magical enough!) to yield the strange and extraordinarily rich landscape of my invented world. The cities were magnified versions of cities I had visited in Europe or Asia; the ruins of the prehistoric Shapeshifter capital were inspired by Roman ruins I had clambered through in North Africa; the geology was Earth-plus geology, everything writ large.

The grand scale of everything was the most important point. It would not have been enough simply to tell the old story of the disinherited prince yet again. It would not have been enough just to set a pack of wanderers loose on a gaudy hodgepodge of a planet. It would not have been enough to flange together a governmental system for that planet out of bits of Roman history and medieval archetypes. It would not have been enough merely to make up a bunch of funny animals and peculiar plants. I had to create, out of available parts, something plausi-

ble, something internally consistent, and something that was entirely new, which by virtue of its size, its splendor, and the richness of detail with which I envisioned everything, would provide my readers with an experience they could not have had before and would never forget.

For that I needed six months of planning and research, six intense months of day-by-day writing, and some additional months of revision. But the result was successful, a big, popular book that won me an audience far larger than I had ever had before.

What I learned from the Majipoor experience is:

—Make it big. Scope counts, if you want a multi-book concept. (I wasn't looking for one, but very quickly realized that I had one anyway.)

—Make it ancient. Plenty of history is useful in the novel of scope, and in order to invent plenty of history, you need to know plenty yourself.

—See it and feel it from within: birds and bugs and plants, critters large and small, the cuisine, the landscape, the smell of the air, the taste of the water, the color of the sky. Make it real for yourself and it will be real for your readers. Call on all the physics, chemistry, and biology at your command, and make sure that no inherently contradictory scientific aspects get yoked together because you think your plot requires them. ("What the hell, it's only science fiction" is not a sufficient justification for having a planet's population of carnivorous animals outnumber the herbivores or the atmosphere of one occupied by humans to have the nice bracing tingle of sulfur trioxide.) Get to know textures, detail, color, shape, above all the *purpose* of each component part of the entire invention. Nothing should be there just because it amuses you to toss it in. Everything should fit into a logical ecological structure. If your invented world is a place you know extremely well, but nevertheless would like to return to again and again, your readers will feel the same way about it. ○

Saving Money

is no mystery!

Get **4** back
issues for
just \$5.95!

*That's 70% off
the regular price!*

Expand your imagination
with 4 favorite issues
of *Ellery Queen's
Mystery Magazine*
at a fraction of their
original price!

To get your value pack, fill out
the coupon below and mail it to
us with your payment today.

DELL MAGAZINES

Suite SM-100, 6 Prowitt Street, Norwalk, CT 06855-1220

YES! Please send me
my Ellery Queen's Mystery
Magazine Value Pack. I get 4
back issues for just \$5.95 plus
\$2 shipping and handling
(\$7.95 per pack, U.S. funds).
My payment of \$_____
is enclosed. (EQPK04)

Name: _____
(Please print)

Address: _____

City: _____

State: _____ ZIP: _____

Please make checks payable to Dell Magazines Direct. Allow 8 weeks for delivery. Magazines are back issues shipped together in one package. To keep prices low we cannot make custom orders. Add \$4 additional shipping and handling for delivery outside the U.S.A. Offer expires 6/30/10.

59L-NHQVLS

Since his first story for *Asimov's*—"Gunfight at the Sugarloaf Pet Food & Taxidermy" (January 2007)—Jeff Carlson has gone on to become an internationally bestselling author and a finalist for the Philip K. Dick Award with his *Plague Year* trilogy. The third book in this series, *Plague Zone*, will be out in December from Ace. Free excerpts from Jeff's work, as well as videos, contests, and more, can be found on his web site at www.jverse.com. His new tale for us brings police officer Julie Beauchain, whose dangerously hot holiday season leads her to . . .

A LOVELY LITTLE CHRISTMAS FIRE

Jeff Carlson

Someone was smart enough to call her. Even with the Army and DHS on scene, the governor had tapped her personally. *Miss Beauchain?* he said on the phone. The job couldn't have been any dirtier, but that kind of compliment was better than cash, neck rubs, or beaches, so Julie grinned as she turned into the moist stink of the bugs.

"Watch the ceiling!" she yelled.

"I'm more worried about the floor," Highsong said.

Julie waved her TI gun as she hit the stairs, glancing back at him through the office space. "The ceiling is hot—"

Highsong wasn't moving. "We're three stories up," he said. "If the floor lets go, you won't be so excited about making our bonus."

He wouldn't have stopped her any faster if he'd smacked the wide part of her jeans. Julie froze, then turned on the fourth step, exasperated—in part because he was twenty feet away. A dozen low cubicles separated them. Highsong could be as stubborn as a rock, but the truth was they made a fine pair. Julie was aware that they both looked out of place in this well-organized call center, dragging guns and packs into the maze of desks. He was six and a half feet of Irish/Cheyenne, a mix almost as exotic as her own African/Arabic/French ancestry, and lean and firm in comparison to her curves.

"It's not about the money," she said.

"Isn't it?"

"It's about doing well."

"Then why is your radio off?"

"We don't need help."

"Always the superhero."

Watching him, Julie shifted beneath thirty pounds of sensors and other gear. She never felt the weight when she was running—only when they stopped to rest in the late July heat—and the mischief in her heart grew as she took in Highsong's posture. Spine straight. Arms folded. His protectiveness made her happy, so she flirted with him by stamping her feet up and down two stairs in a spontaneous little salsa dance. Maybe she put more hip into it than necessary. *Ba boom bang bang*. Her thoughts were like a drum. *I love you*.

"Seems safe," she said, lilting the words.

"If you fall through—"

"You wish."

Highsong's mouth twisted as he fought with a smile and won. His scowl deepened. Then he started toward her through the cubicles. "Just be careful," he said.

Julie laughed. "They haven't made a bug yet that's got more brains than—Aaah!"

The stairwell exploded overhead. Julie fell. In the first seconds, the avalanche was only noise, a stampede of footsteps and crashing boxes, but then she was overwhelmed by hundreds of small, shiny objects and cardboard and a leaping man. He was Caucasian. Brown hair. Brown beard. He wore a backpack even larger than her own.

"Run!" he screamed.

Julie tumbled into an unladylike heap on the floor, her elbows and knees spread to catch herself. Instead, the man squashed her flat when he put his shoe on her pack. Everywhere, the small trinkets clattered down the stairs—silver balls and red balls and gold stars—and Highsong shouted behind her. He might have tried to intercept the man. Julie heard someone bang against a desk, another shout, and a sharper *crash*.

She yelled, "What the—"

Then she got a face full of bugs. The stairwell was buried in winged termites. They were slick, yellow, damp, stinking. Julie shrieked and clawed both hands across her mouth.

"Yuck!"

Blinded by the swarm, she tried to get up. Someone grabbed her shoulder. Highsong. No one else would have waded into the bugs for her—but he was still supporting her when he slipped, yanking her sideways. Julie bounced off the wall. Highsong hit the floor. She landed on him.

Fortunately, the termites were dispersing. Julie spat in disgust and looked around, not unhappy with her position on Highsong's chest. There were bugs in his hair and bugs on the floor and Julie giggled to shake off the lasting sensation of creepy little feet against her skin. But it was too hot to stay together. The office building was stifling in the summer sun, so she patted his arm affectionately and began to roll aside.

Highsong grabbed her waist. "Wait. You okay?"

"Hey!" Julie said, not fighting too hard.

His free hand went to the absurd junk on the floor, distracting her as he lifted a clump of trinkets—a glittering blue-and-white ball, a plastic snowman, and a red-nosed toy reindeer. Julie wrinkled her eyebrows in confusion. Highsong smiled. "Merry Christmas," he said. Then he kissed her.

What had the other man been doing in the building? This part of town was supposed to be clear, but some hold-outs had stayed to fight the bugs themselves. There

were also looters, thrill-seekers, and other assorted fruitcakes. The man was probably stealing as much as he could carry. He was about the twentieth unauthorized person they'd seen today.

Julie rubbed a bruised elbow as she and Highsong worked to kill the termites. It was messy. The bugs were in the walls and file cabinets and a translucent squirming mass of yellow bodies burst from an easy chair in one office. The air was hazy with winged termites and dust. They had a hard time finding the nest. Julie used her thermal imaging gun to locate the worst pockets in the walls as Highsong created some breathing room with his glue sprayer. They laid down bait and pheromone beacons.

As it turned out, there were already three queen colonies. *Heterotermes aureus machovskiy* moved fast—too fast for an eleven syllable name. Julie called 'em *machos* for short, like nachos, even though their creator's surname was pronounced *ma CHOV ski*. Lance Machovsky. His babies were smaller than most termite species but acted as though they bled methamphetamine.

The bugs had ravaged most of the building's top floor, which seemed to be dedicated to management offices and storage for discontinued items. In back, endless boxes had slumped to the floor, chewed apart by the machos, leaving flecks of bright wrapping paper and cardboard and what appeared to be eighty-six billion Christmas ornaments and other holiday goodies like pint-size Marys and Santa Clauses. Julie crunched through the debris with an alarming sense of guilt.

"Is this going to put us on the nice list or the naughty?" she called back to Highsong, wincing at each *krnnch* and *pop* of snowflakes, elves, and holly beneath her boots.

"You know which list you're on," he said.

They were dumber than pigs to mix work and romance, of course. Julie's grandpa would have said *Never poop where you eat*, with stronger language, but Julie Beauchain and William Highsong had been partners in the Department of Fish, Wildlife & Parks before they were lovers. Neither of them wanted to quit the job. Putting in for a transfer would have created another problem, most likely moving one of them too far across Montana to see each other regularly. So they had rules.

Rule Number One: Keep your clothes on during your shift.

"Stop it!" Julie said, laughing as she skipped away from Highsong outside the office building. But he caught her easily. The sidewalk was empty. The road was empty. Julie let Highsong take her prisoner again and they nuzzled right there beside an abandoned car for anyone to see, no matter how filthy they were with grime and sweat.

"I'm glad you're all right," he said.

"Next building," she said.

"That guy could've broken your neck."

"And you let him go."

"That's right." Highsong touched the sensitive skin behind her ear and Julie shivered.

"This is business, not pleasure," she said, even as she ruined her own attempt at severity with a wink. She loved to encourage his playful side—was that the Irish in him or the plains-riding Cheyenne?—and she felt especially glad for it now. The silence was worse than the bugs.

Missoula, Montana, was hardly a major metropolis with a population of sixty thousand, but it seemed larger in the preternatural quiet. As far as she could see, the downtown blocks were lifeless, resonating only with the sound of distant helicopters. She smelled smoke and gasoline.

"Let's move," she said. "We're behind schedule."

"Yes, sir."

That earned him a whack and another approving kiss. The truth was that Julie wore the pants in their relationship. At least she liked to think so. Highsong was hardly a cliché TV Tonto, yet he seemed content to follow her lead, in part because her head was just louder than his. Most of their gadgets were Julie's inventions. Their notoriety was also due to her tech skills. Two days ago, every public servant in Montana had been called into duty at all levels—city, state, and federal—but few Fish, Wildlife & Parks rangers like themselves were actually in combat.

Missoula had been under DHS quarantine for thirty-plus hours as the 4th Infantry and units of the National Guard tried to control the infested areas. Martial law was in force across most of Big Sky Country and neighboring Idaho.

“Scanning,” Julie said as she tried the glass doors of the next building. The ground floor was retail, a coffee shop and a women’s clothing store. Both were locked. Very few people had obeyed the requests by DHS to leave their businesses and homes uncured. No problem. Highsong took his prybar to the coffee shop door and they were in.

Julie was already fairly sure the place was clean. Even sitting still, machos ran hotter than normal termites—and these bugs never sat still. Her TI gun had only penetrated through the windows into the front room, but if there were machos anywhere in the coffee shop, she would have picked up movement or trails outside where the bugs were squeezing through the slightest gaps around the windows, doors, or vents. That was how they’d tagged the office building next door. *H. aureus machovsky* was voracious. Even with more than enough dry wood or paper to sustain a colony, the machos always sent scouts to expand their foraging area.

Julie and Highsong swept the back rooms of the coffee shop, then moved to the clothing store. Minutes later, they broke into the first of eight apartments on the floors above. It was hot work. Their grid consisted of two full city blocks, which they were expected to clear before sundown, so the pace was relentless. Sweep each room. Leave bait if suspicious. Chart their maps. Keep moving.

“You can’t buy a work-out like this,” Julie gasped at the top of three flights of stairs. She hoped Highsong would smile and say *You don’t need the exercise, babe.*

The big lunk just nodded and said, “No kidding.”

Julie laughed. He gave her a quizzical look—yet as much as she liked to argue, there wasn’t time. She would bring it up again in the shower, though, he could be sure of that.

“You’re some date, Highsong,” she said.

“What are you talking about?”

I love you, she thought, but she was careful with those words, hoarding them to herself. It was better to joke. That was how their relationship had begun, light and easy, and for the most part Julie was okay if it stayed that way. Except she was crazy for him. Who was she protecting?

“Scanning,” she said as she approached the next building.

Inside, they refilled their canteens in a men’s room sink and snacked on the sodium-laced Buffalo Wing chips and bland cheese sticks they found in a break room, scavenging like the machos. Unfortunately, their packs were nearly empty of beacons and bait. Soon they’d be forced to hoof it back to their FW&P jeep, which they’d left down the block.

They emerged into the late afternoon sun with less than two-thirds of their quota done. Julie’s disappointment made her mad, which seemed to heighten her senses. She felt on stage in the empty city. Maybe that was why she noticed the change in the air. There were voices around the corner of the nearest intersection.

“You hear that?” she asked. “Either we’ve got more civvies who should’ve evacuated or there’s another bug team poaching our grid, and I don’t want ‘em making any kills that are ours. Let’s get in their face.”

"We could use the help."

"Whose side are you on?"

"Let's just call it in," Highsong said, but Julie marched away from him. They could have driven, but their jeep was in the opposite direction, and Julie wanted to surprise the other group if possible.

She was still two buildings from the corner when the voices turned to screams. "Look out!" a man yelled as Julie broke into a run, the TI gun swinging in one hand. Her pack jostled against her shoulders. Highsong passed her and she doubled her effort, cursing under her breath. What she wouldn't give for legs that long.

He beat her to the intersection. Then they froze. The five men and women in the street were unauthorized persons, that much was clear. No uniforms. No gear. They'd also dropped a lot of money when they panicked, breaking away from the doors of a check cashing operation. Machos rushed from another entrance to the building as if the two-story structure had opened its mouth and breathed. The fog was an evil yellow. Great tendrils of bugs swept over the paper bills on the street and absorbed the screaming people.

Three of them made it to their pick-up truck, beating madly at their hair and faces. They left a duffel bag and their friends behind in the swarm.

"Jimmy!" a woman shrieked from the pick-up.

"Freeze!" Julie yelled. They ignored her. The engine roared and the full-size Dodge Ram lurched toward Julie and Highsong through the bugs, trying to intercept one man. The other guy had charged in the opposite direction.

Neither Julie nor Highsong had any real weapons, so Julie faked it. Her thermal-imaging gun looked like a Martian death ray with its stubby barrel and a side-mounted display as round as a dinner plate. Julie pointed it at them, shoving it forward in a classic gunman's stance. Someone inside the pick-up shouted. The vehicle jerked.

Highsong blasted them with his glue sprayer, hosing down the windshield and the open passenger door and the schmoe they were trying to rescue. The schmoe fell down, coated in a sticky gray mess full of hundreds of bugs. At the same time, the pick-up swerved again—its driver blind—then submarined magnificently into the streetfront of a laundromat, sending glass through the sky. Alarms went off. The neon **TOPWASH** sign slipped and then detonated against the truckbed.

"Holy crap," Highsong said.

Julie had almost lost track of the fifth bandit, the one on the far side of the bugs, but he flinched and looked back at the noise. She saw his brown hair and beard and recognized the extra large pack.

"That's the same guy from the Christmas place!" Julie yelled, running toward the billowing swarm.

Highsong caught her arm. "Let him go," he said.

"What?!"

"These people are hurt. I need help."

Julie glanced at the moaning schmoe in the street and the dazed bandits inside the truck. None of them had fled in the same direction as the fifth guy. Was he even with them? "Highsong, we can't let him get away! Something's not right about—"

"Get on the radio or I'll glue you myself," he said.

The state police and 4th Infantry platoon who responded came in two patrol cars, two gun-mounted Humvees and a half-ton Army truck. Julie was taken aback. She wouldn't have expected more than the patrol cars even if they'd captured Butch Cassidy and the Hole in the Wall gang.

The arrests derailed them from their bug hunt. Julie hated to give up on her grid,

but the police sergeant wanted their statements and the platoon captain dispatched his men into the infested building. "I guess that's enough fun for one day," Julie said to Hightsong, leaning close as she watched the cuffed, bruised, and bandaged robbers led into the back of the truck. "Um. Wanna take a bath?"

"Yep."

No nonsense. That was what she liked about him. Lord knew she generated enough malarkey for the two of them. *Is that why you haven't asked me to move in with you?* she wondered as they got into the sergeant's patrol car. One of his men would drive their FW&P jeep back to HQ.

The outskirts of the business district looked like a war zone. Five huge fires crackled in the Wal-Mart's parking lot, sending smoke over the city like winter clouds. Civilian truck rigs and Army vehicles jammed the streets, forcing Julie's escorts to stop and start through the traffic—empty trucks leaving, full trucks arriving.

Ash ticked against the windshield as she stared out, biting her lip. All of the incoming rigs were swaddled in ungainly fat bulges of plastic. The soldiers unloading the trucks wore respirators, goggles, and jackets despite the summer heat. Others patrolled the lot with glue guns and flamethrowers.

They were burning Christmas trees—hundreds upon hundreds of Christmas trees. The whole scene looked like a demented Satanic fantasy. *Say something funny*, Julie thought, but her mind had gone blank. She loved Christmas. Growing up, the holidays were the best times in her life, when she and her mother visited her cousins in Tampa and Mom put on a convincing veneer of normality, drinking less, hugging her more, even joining in for carols and cooking and corny old movies like *It's A Wonderful Life*.

Watching the trees ablaze was like incinerating those memories. Worse, Julie knew this was one of the smallest burns in Montana. Rumor was there were uncontrolled fires in wide swaths of forest just east of Missoula on the Continental Divide. This hell consisted of a tiny number of trees. By the last count she'd heard, barely a thousand had been reduced to charred stumps on the Wal-Mart's flat asphalt lot. These trees had been cut from city parks and open spaces—not only to be destroyed but tested for termite samples.

Each pyre had a white tent set beside it. Technicians in yellow protective gear strode back and forth from the incoming trees and their tents with clippers, jars, chem kits, rakes, nets, spectrometers, and laptops.

"It's like *Plan 9 from Outer Space*," Julie said at last, turning in her seat to keep her eyes on the Wal-Mart as they broke through the heavy traffic.

"You all right?" Hightsong asked.

He must have heard the slightest hitch in her voice, which left Julie both unsettled and pleased. "Sure," she said. "I'm great. Hungry. Can't wait to get out of these clothes."

That drew a glance from the cop at the wheel, a white guy with freckles. Julie smiled to herself, feeling better.

The trees aren't my fault, she thought.

Headquarters was in a preschool around the corner, which seemed goofy, but the school offered a neat space with lots of tables for the DHS and military officials who were running the show. They'd also wanted to be close to their field labs.

As soon as the cop parked his car, Julie hopped out and beelined inside, looking for Agents Coughlin or Reaves. Once again she felt that jarring sense of the surreal. Hard-voiced men and women sat among laptops and radio gear, surrounded by rainbow-colored charts of the ABCs, the solar system, and smiling cartoon dinosaurs.

She found Reaves first, a tall, thin man with thick wheat hair. He was on the phone but Julie said, "We have a problem."

Reaves recognized her without a second glance. He covered his phone with one hand and nodded. "Hey, sure, we heard about your little gang of *banditos*. Nice work."

Just help the cops and I'll do what I can to keep the paperwork to a minimum. Thanks."

"No. Listen. I need property records and access to your criminal database."

"What?"

"I'm onto something bigger than robbery," she said. "Can you help me with the records?"

It was a place to start. How were the two buildings linked? The saboteur might be attacking rival businesses in order to destroy the competition—or was it personal? Maybe he was nothing more than a disgruntled employee. Julie's instincts said *no*, but they needed to test that theory, too.

Reaves frowned at her. "What exactly are we talking about here, Miz Bo-Chain?"

"Someone's planting bugs in the city."

"You mean bringing them in?"

"Yes."

Reaves lifted one hand and shouted across the room. "Leber! Hey, Leber!"

The other guy was white, too. They were all white, except for the Hispanics and blacks in the Army and a few Asians and Hispanics among the federal agents. Montana was not a diverse state, certainly not like Florida. Julie was accustomed to being the only black woman for miles around. New acquaintances usually stumbled over her Bayou name, mostly in an effort to get it right but sometimes only to mock her. *Missus Boo-Kayne. Miz Boy-Shane.* That the governor had pronounced it correctly spoke of his willingness to invest in her, but Julie always felt the stigma of being an outsider.

"Leber, this is Bo-Kayne," Reaves said. "She says she saw someone bringing bugs into the city. I want to know where they hit, how hard, and why. Look at our DTs again. Get me something fast."

"Sure," Leber said. "Come over to my station."

DTs weren't a new thought for Julie, either. The media was rife with speculation that domestic terrorists had released the machos despite announcements to the contrary by government officials. These white boys in their five hundred dollar suits had all the answers—they said they knew who'd created the termites and why—but Julie didn't trust them. Not entirely.

Hightsong joined her in the HQ as Leber walked her through the same questions half a dozen times, challenging everything they'd seen. That was his job. He was a federal investigator. Leber wasn't condescending but he didn't take her at her word, either. Too often, he doubted her. Was she imagining it? Yes, she had a problem with authority that could be traced all the way back to her mother, ol' bourbon brains, and her father, who'd skipped when she was five. That wasn't the issue. Julie preferred to think she was simply a perfect fit for the American West, loaded with independence, spirit, and know-how.

For example, it was deeply quixotic for her to make fun of Dr. Lance Machovsky's name, but Julie had been suspicious of this whole plate of worms since the DHS briefings, which, well, had been too brief.

"You're certain you saw the same man?" Leber said, trying again to deflect her.

"Yes. Look." Julie was losing her temper. "Someone's either trying to take out the competition or settling a grudge or both, and they don't care who else gets hurt."

"I understand your concern," Leber said.

She fumed while he tapped blandly at his computer. Was he delaying her? Why? Maybe they just didn't want her causing a fuss. DHS seemed to specialize in turning out these smooth, unflappable men, who, in turn, conveyed only calm and confidence to the public.

DHS said the termites were just one of many gene-splices under development by

private and government bio research teams in response to the agriculture industry's issues with blight and pests. Global warming would increase crop threats throughout the twenty-first century. Manmade attacks were also a real possibility, and DHS and the White House officially—quietly—supported efforts to meet such dangers.

Machovsky worked for DawnTech. The field test they'd chosen first was directed against a comparatively humble foe, so-called pine rust, a fungus that had decimated Montana's holiday economy for three years running. It infected blue spruce and every species of fir—in other words, the most popular Christmas trees in the nation. Between the blockades and the lawsuits out of California, Oregon, and Colorado, where the rust had spread with imported trees and seeds, Big Sky Country was taking a huge beating. Nurseries made up 15 percent of Montana's economy. Not all of them were Christmas tree farms, of course, but the entire industry had suffered.

Heterotermes aureus was a desert termite. It could not survive in the damp, cold north, not for long—not even in the summer. That was its failsafe. Machovsky had crossed his bugs with the black fly and with the rust itself. Fly genes accelerated the machos' metabolism. The rust genes meant they were dependent on the fungus as a nutritional source. *H. aureus machovsky* was intended to pick and choose its way through a diseased farm at a hysterical pace, then weaken and collapse after exhausting the supply of rust-sick wood.

Breed fast, spread fast, die fast. That the machos could survive without the rust was a surprise adaptation. Whoops.

"So what happens next?" Julie asked, gesturing at Highsong and herself. "We want to help—before this guy brings more bugs inside the quarantine. We both know the city, and we're good with our hands. Can you put us on the team?"

"I'll be in touch," Leber said.

"When? Today?"

"I'll be in touch," Leber said.

It was a brush-off. Julie and Highsong left headquarters with no answers. She was only generating more questions, such as where did the saboteur get not just one queen colony, but several? How would he gather thousands of bugs in order to pack them into the city? One man alone couldn't collect and preserve a colony.

Julie didn't like the over-reaction to the gang of bandits, either. Yes, an entire Army division was in-state, but there were also sixty thousand refugees and the fires and a pandemic on their to-do lists. No one had twenty men to spare unless they were nervous about what she and Highsong might uncover at the site. Who was worried? The feds? Somebody local? Could she trace the orders to send a full platoon back into the tangled chain of command?

As soon as they were outside, Julie pulled her iPhone and tapped in a Los Angeles-area number, gazing up through the ash. It only rang once.

"Beauchain?" A young man.

"Em, you're going to like this," she said.

His voice rose in pitch. "Am I hallucinating or are you calling me on a cell phone?"

"Listen, I just—"

"Idiot." He hung up.

"Oh boy." Julie turned to Highsong and slung her arm around his waist, feeling tired and lost and glad to have him. "We should just go back to my place," she said.

"Nah." Highsong squeezed her. "Let's get in some trouble first."

Her place was a cot in a big tent surrounded by big tents where DHS was housing civilian law enforcement groups on the north side of town. Highsong had been assigned to a men's tent nearby, but they walked to his pick-up truck instead, which

hardly offered any more privacy, lost in a sea of vehicles that other cops, rangers, firefighters, and workmen were using as sleeping quarters and offices. People were everywhere in the vast parking lot.

"You pervert," Julie said.

Hightsong didn't react, opening the cab and waving her inside. His laptop was squirreled away behind his seat. He gave it to her and scratched her back as she typed at the machine. DHS had wi-fi over most of the camp. It was sluggish with traffic, but that was good. Julie's emails would be like one little mouse in the on-going circus.

It's your favorite idiot, she typed.

Forgiven. I've seen the news. You're stressed. What's up?

I need some background, she typed. Can you poke around for me?

Poking is my middle name.

Em was a friend she'd made on the usenets, trading tech advice and buyer tips. She was pretty sure he didn't actually live in Los Angeles. For all she knew, he was right here in Missoula or in Maine, Milan, or Moscow, but he'd weathermanned his lines through L.A. for cover. He said he was wanted by the FBI. That was probably just geek posturing, but Em was good at what he did.

Julie typed up the two buildings' addresses and a run-down on Machovsky. Maybe her hacker buddy would draw some connections she couldn't.

He didn't test her patience. A mere twenty minutes passed. If she was worth her weight, she would've jumped Hightsong or at least smooched a bit, but she wasn't nineteen anymore, she was thirty-four, and it had been a long day. They both napped. Other people came and went through the parking lot, shouting, banging doors, as Julie curled on the long bench seat with her head on Hightsong's thigh. Then his laptop chimed.

You're neck-deep in slime, Em emailed. A lot of DawnTech's records are sealed. Federally sealed. Ready for the good news?

"Oh boy," Julie said. *There's good news?* she typed.

Em dumped a handful of files on her. *Enjoy, he said. I'm out. You don't know me.*

"Oh boy," Julie said again.

DawnTech was so familiar with termites because they'd been experimenting with the bugs as a clean energy source. Termites could produce as much as two liters of hydrogen from digesting a single piece of paper. The highly specialized microbes in their digestive tracts made each bug an efficient bioreactor, which was why Julie's TI guns worked so well.

It was also why Em thought gene-spliced termites could be used as living firebombs. A mating pair might infiltrate enemy territory—tiny, insignificant, organic, untraceable—then breed until they hit critical mass. Termites made love three times a day, Em noted, and some of DawnTech's funding came from DARPA, which meant the Pentagon. Top secret.

"Where did you say you knew this guy from?" Hightsong asked, reading over Julie's shoulder.

"Okay, so some of it's nuts."

"Some of it?"

"Here's the good news. Next file. Look at this."

The first building where they'd met the saboteur held the national ordering center and sales offices of Holiday House, a billion dollar name in Christmas, Hanukkah, Kwanzaa, and Easter supplies. The embargo on Christmas trees had halved their earnings in past years. More interestingly, the same parent corporation that controlled Holiday House also owned the second building and more in Missoula. Em hadn't been able to draw a link between that corporate blind and DawnTech, but

he suggested it was obvious. Who else could be supplying the saboteur with bugs? According to Em' numbers, the whole thing was an insurance scam. They were infesting their own business holdings and testing an insanely lucrative weapons program at the same time.

Highsong just shook his head. "How do we get into stuff like this?" he asked.

"Oh my god. You can say that again."

"You, uh, you want to tell Agent Leber?"

"No." Julie met his eyes and said, "No. This is our city."

They slipped back into Missoula as dusk fell. Driving Highsong's truck through Army lines was easy enough. They had ID and their partly completed chart and maps. "We're just trying to finish up," Julie told the lieutenant who inspected her DHS-issued pass, and it wasn't a lie. She wanted revenge.

Things got more complicated after dark. To start with, they worked without lights. Worse, there were only two of them, and Em had provided four addresses to stake out. Highsong suggested splitting up, but Julie said no. The city was quieting down, but there were still looters and Army patrols and God Knew Who Else poking around. It was better to stick together. If they got bored, maybe she'd get up the courage to offer him a key to her house. Too bad the first hour was anything but dull as they raced from site to site with his headlights off, rifling through the truckbed for their packs, TI guns, and other gear.

Once they crunched over an abandoned bike lying in the street. Another time they nearly flattened a stray dog. Julie wanted to go after it. She had a soft spot for animals, but Highsong convinced her to stay on mission.

Then the waiting began. They'd hidden his truck alongside a bakery across the street from a mortgage broker's offices, which seemed the most valuable of their four targets.

"What do you think the paperwork is worth if the machos eat it?" Julie asked, holding his hand.

"Everything's electronic now, isn't it?" Highsong said. "I think the insurance might pay them more for lost business and damaged real estate than paper files. Maybe they can also play loose with their taxes if a bunch of receipts disappear. I dunno. If they wipe out every place they own, it's gotta be worth bazillions."

"And meanwhile the bugs are chewing up other people's homes. What a bunch of—"

Beep! His radio lit up.

"That's channel two," Highsong said. "We're in the wrong place."

"Go!" Julie shouted even as he hit the ignition. She figured they had five minutes, even ten, but she didn't want to miss the kill. In her excitement, she lifted her camcorder from the seat beside her and hugged it like a mad scientist. "Ha! Ha ha ha! We got the son of a bitch!"

Highsong careened through town with his lights on. They were sure their trap was foolproof and unconcerned with scaring their man off. Speed was only slightly less important than getting there alive.

"Whoa!" Julie screamed as Highsong swung around a corner only to find the road peppered with stand-still cars. The fender on her side banged against a white Buick, throwing sparks. The side mirror splintered. Then he pinballed through the other vehicles and slammed on his brakes, squashing Julie's chest against her seatbelt.

"Where is he?"

"I don't— There!" Julie flung her door open and dragged her pack onto her shoulders as she ran. Above her loomed one of Missoula's "skyscrapers," a six-story office complex with lower buildings on either side.

A dark Lexus hidden in one of the garage entrances must have belonged to their

victim. He'd opened the driver door, but it was too late. Their trap had attracted machos from all directions.

The frenzy enshrouding him looked like a nine-foot tornado. He shrieked and kicked inside it, creating brief, man-shaped holes in the gleaming yellow termite storm. One glimpse was enough for Julie to see that his clothes were coming away in shreds.

"Can he breathe?" Highsong yelled behind her.

Who cares? Julie thought. "It'll be over in seconds!"

Half-blind, disoriented, and naked—and God save him if he was ticklish—the man flailed helplessly against his car as the machos ripped into its luxury interior. Wet masses of bugs surged against the glass.

Julie was jubilant. *Got you!* she thought, trying to point her camcorder at him as she dashed onto the sidewalk.

But it was too late for her, too.

A long spiral of termites swept away from the bad guy and dimmed the corona of Highsong's headlights, enfolding Julie in the nasty fluttering swarm.

"Gaaaaaaa!" she shrieked.

They'd obviously hidden their beacons well enough for the man to set off the trip-wire in the building's entrance, and no one but evil-doers should be entering this office complex tonight. The same electrical impulse that alerted Highsong via radio had also opened a handful of chem packets, covering the man with an invisible fog. The machos' sex pheromones were too subtle for a human nose, even laced with the molecular signature of pine rust, but the bad guy probably heard the beacons pop and then saw Julie's wiring and radio transceiver.

Unfortunately, neither Julie nor Highsong had noticed the leaking beacon they must have broken or triggered inside his truck. They were coated with sex juice, too, and the machos were in a confused, rapturous craze. The bugs tried to eat anything that was plant-based—like cotton.

Julie grabbed at her top as she dropped and thrashed on the sidewalk, hoping to crush the termites, but it was no good. She was grateful just to get enough air. Then her shirt came apart in her hands and her pants sagged away from her hips. Her bra went next and she staggered up, bewildered and choking.

The bad guy got clear of the swarm first. Maybe he'd lost his keys. Maybe jumping into the bug orgy inside his car was too horrible to contemplate. Either way, his pale white hiney broke into a sprint down the street, each cheek shining in Highsong's headlights.

"Don't move or I'll shoot!" Julie shouted, swimming through the machos after him. Highsong was on his feet, too, but tripped over the ragged fabric of his jeans. Julie was lucky her pants had separated completely—and her nylon shoes were intact. It was only by the grace of God that she'd worn her leather jacket, which survived. Otherwise she would have been wearing less than a stripper, and she wasn't a small girl. She felt herself bounce as she charged after the bad guy, armed only with her camcorder. What if he had a gun?

"Julie!" Highsong yelled.

The canisters left beside the bad guy's car were vital evidence—could they trace this equipment back to the people who'd packed more termite colonies into those steel tubes for him?—but she wanted this lunatic to pay personally for what he'd done, so she didn't stop.

The naked chase was on.

They quickly left the headlights, but the bad guy wasn't getting enough sun. His back had some color, yet his buttocks were like round little ghosts churning in the night. He ran like he still had a few bugs where it counted.

Bouncing, Julie began to fall behind. Cold, she hollered in frustration: "Freeze! I said freeze!"

The world went supernova. In front of them, the street flared with two dazzling floodlamps and the 4th Infantry pinned the bad guy with fifteen rifles, several glue guns, and a bullhorn. "HALT! PUT YOUR HANDS UP! THIS IS THE UNITED STATES ARMY AND YOU ARE—" The voice turned away. "They're not wearing any clothes," it said before swinging back again at full volume. "YOU'RE UNDER ARREST!"

Julie caught up with the bad guy as he stood motionless in the brilliant light, casting a thin shadow like a rat with his hands crossed over his goodies. Behind her, Highsong's truck joined the scene but stopped when the bullhorn shouted again. "HALT!" A dozen soldiers ran forward, their smooth helmets bobbing through the glare. Julie tried her best to pull her jacket down past her waist, but she was more interested in making sure the bad guy saw her grin.

It was the same brown-haired dude from before.

"Gotcha," she said.

The soldiers were a security detail assigned to two neighboring banks. They didn't have any blankets or tarps on hand, but one man gave Julie his pants, earning a round of hoots and commentary that doubled in volume when she thanked him with a chaste kiss.

Minutes later, DHS came down on their location like a ton of horse pucky. No less than twenty agents pushed in among the soldiers, taking their catch and isolating Julie and Highsong. That was okay. Julie had already passed her camcorder to the

PS FORM 3526: STATEMENT OF OWNERSHIP, MANAGEMENT AND CIRCULATION

1. Publication Title: Asimov's Science Fiction; 2. Publication Number: 522-310; 3. Filing Date: 9/30/09; 4. Issue Frequency: Monthly except for combined issues April/May and Oct/Nov; 5. Number of Issues Published Annually: 10; 6. Annual Subscription Price: \$55.90; 7. Complete Mailing Address of Known Office of Publication: 267 Broadway, 4th Floor, New York, NY 10007; Contact Person: Penny Sarafin; Telephone: (203) 866-6688; 8. Complete Mailing Address of Headquarters or General Business Office of Publisher: 6 Prowitt St., Norwalk, CT 06855-1220; 9. Full Names and Complete Mailing Address of Publisher: Dell Magazines, 6 Prowitt St., Norwalk, CT 06855; Editor: Sheila Williams, Dell Magazines, 267 Broadway, 4th Floor, New York, NY 10007; Managing Editor: Brian Bieniowski, Dell Magazines, 267 Broadway, 4th Floor, New York, NY 10007; 10. Owner: Penny Publications, LLC, 6 Prowitt Street, Norwalk, CT 06855-1220. Shareholders owning 1% or more are Selma, John, James, and Peter Kanter, 6 Prowitt St., Norwalk, CT 06855-1220; 11. Known Bondholders, Mortgagees, and Other Security Holders Owning or Holding 1 Percent or More of Total Amount of Bonds, Mortgages, or Other Securities: There are no bondholders, mortgagees, or other security holders; 12. Tax Status: N/A; 13. Publication Title: Asimov's Science Fiction; 14. Issue Date for Circulation Data: 2/09; 15. Extent and Nature of Circulation – Average No. Copies Each Issue During Preceding 12 Months. a1. Total Number of Copies: 25,209; b1a. Mailed Outside-County Paid Subscriptions Stated on PS Form 3541: 13,731; b2a. Mailed In-County Paid Subscriptions Stated on PS Form 3541: 0; b3a. Paid Distribution Outside the Mails Including Sales Through Dealers and Carriers, Street Vendors, Counter Sales, and Other Paid Distribution Outside USPS: 9,656; b4a. Paid Distribution by Other Classes of Mail Through the USPS: 0; c1. Total Paid Distribution: 23,387; d1a. Free or Nominal Rate Outside-County Copies Included on PS Form 3541: 22; d2a. Free or Nominal Rate In-County Copies Included on PS Form 3541: 0; d3a. Free or Nominal Rate Copies Mailed at Other Classes Through the USPS: 0; d4a. Free or Nominal Rate Distribution Outside the Mail: 0; e1. Total Free or Nominal Rate Distribution: 22; f1. Total Distribution: 23,409; g1. Copies not Distributed: 1,800; h1. Total: 25,209; i1. Percent Paid: 100%; 15. Extent and Nature of Circulation – No. Copies of Single Issue Published Nearest to Filing Date. a2. Total Number of Copies: 24,308; b1b. Mailed Outside-County Paid Subscriptions Stated on PS Form 3541: 13,445; b2b. Mailed In-County Paid Subscriptions Stated on PS Form 3541: 0; b3b. Paid Distribution Outside the Mails Including Sales Through Dealers and Carriers, Street Vendors, Counter Sales, and Other Paid Distribution Outside USPS: 9,180; b4b. Paid Distribution by Other Classes of Mail Through the USPS: 0; c2. Total Paid Distribution: 22,625; d1b. Free or Nominal Rate Outside-County Copies Included on PS Form 3541: 22; d2b. Free or Nominal Rate In-County Copies Included on PS Form 3541: 0; d3b. Free or Nominal Rate Copies Mailed at Other Classes Through the USPS: 0; d4b. Free or Nominal Rate Distribution Outside the Mail: 0; e2. Total Free or Nominal Rate Distribution: 22; f2. Total Distribution: 22,647; g2. Copies not Distributed: 1,661; h2. Total: 24,308; i2. Percent Paid: 100%; 16. Publication of Statement of Ownership: Publication required. Will be printed in the 12/09 issue of this publication; 17. Signature and Title of Publisher: Peter Kanter. Date: 10/1/09.

corporal without any pants and asked him to keep it safe for her—and to smuggle it to the CNN crews outside of town if she didn't return for it. The digital Sony not only contained the machos' assault of the bad guy and Julie's pursuit but also the interviews she'd taped earlier with Highsong and herself, explaining everything with detailed maps, Em's documentation, and property records. Highsong had already uploaded the same files to YouTube, though he'd kept the videos private and inactive for now.

The easy part was done. Agent Reaves brought them to the medical tents for their scrapes and bruises and then to the cafeteria for a hot meal, playing the good cop to the hilt—and Julie and Highsong were as sweet as butter, chatting him up like long-lost family. They'd violated a federal quarantine by reentering Missoula, but they'd also nabbed the villain. Depending on how Reaves decided to play it, they would sink or swim. Finally the claws came out. Reaves wanted all the information they had, their sources, an oath of silence, and their voluntary resignation from the bug teams. Julie grinned and made her counter-offer.

"Nah," she said. "I think DHS should give us a public commendation for our valor above and beyond the call of duty."

"We can press charges."

"We'll lawyer up and dump our videos on the net for the world to see how DHS is testing their bioweapons programs on innocent civilians."

"What?"

"You heard me. Organic firebombs. We know DawnTech is in bed with the Pentagon." Reaves stared at her.

"We don't want to pee on your parade," Julie said. "We're good Americans. We'd prefer not to make noise about your bug programs, but we will to protect ourselves if we have to. Which we shouldn't. We're heroes."

Reaves slowly held out his hand. "You need a medal with that commendation?" he asked, and they shook on it. Julie laughed.

But the next morning she and Highsong were covered in sweat and bugs again. The termite war continued. At least they seemed to be getting ahead of the machos with no one bringing new colonies into the city. She was more aggravated by the fact that four days passed before Reaves called to follow up.

Julie had to dig her phone out of her pack when it rang, setting aside her TI gun and an Army radio.

"Beauchain?" Reaves said, getting it right.

The bad guy was a low-level assistant in Machovsky's research facilities. He'd spilled like a leaky bag. Working from his confession, DHS uncovered ties between DawnTech's board of directors and the ownership of Holiday House. Apparently business was down. Way down. More and more Americans were secularizing Christmas and buying all sorts of inane junk—blow-up lawn dolls, roof displays, plastic trees—but competition for those spiking sales was brutal and Holiday House lost their price margin when their tree sales went down the toilet.

Someone had decided to cut corners, take advantage of the machos' outbreak, and kill the business and all of its subsidiary holdings. That was the extent of the scheme, Reaves said, no federal involvement, no *Men in Black* weapons programs, nobody but the usual suspects—a few inept corporate masters with their eyes on fat pay-offs instead of hard work. People were going to jail. Holiday House would be sued to the ground.

Julie was almost disappointed when she hung up the phone, standing beside a gluey patch of termites on a smoke-ritten Missoula street. "It's over," she told Highsong. "There's no conspiracy. Reaves has everything sewn up tight."

"Maybe next time," he said, smiling as he roughly embraced her. ○

THE ANTI-WORLD

In the anti-world the anticyclones
spin anticlockwise across the anticlines
in slow arcs towards the antipodes.

The Antinomians enthrone an Antipope
while Antigone, uncaring, eats antipasto
on vacation in Anticosti.

In the anti-world, authors pen
antinovels of antiphrasis with antiheroes
who protect their antiques with antiseptic antimacassars

Their doctors prescribe antipyretics
for a swollen antitragus, and sometimes
an antispasmodic in case of antiperistalsis

In the anti-world, the scientists
study antiprotons, antineutrons, and anti-antimatter,
in frozen chambers of antimagnetic antimony

Sitting in the sunshine of Antioch,
I wonder if I took an antiserum,
could I slip over the antinode into the anti-world?

Perhaps then, my life would be
less of an antilogy or at least not so anticlimactic
my relationships no longer antiparallel.

—Andrew Gudgel

AS WOMEN FIGHT

Sara Genge

Like her previous story "Shoes-to-Run" (*Asimov's*, July 2009), "As Women Fight" is yet another tale about gender. Sara tells us she's been fascinated by the intersection of biological and social aspects of gender for quite some time. Her latest story evokes John Varley's grand tradition as it takes unexpected twists and turns quite appropriate for such a complex subject.

Merthe stands next to the felled doe and casts a worried look at the sky. He's aching to train for Fight. Between hunting and setting traps, he hasn't trained for a fortnight, but it's too late and he's too far from home. He hoists the doe on his shoulder and heads back. Snow crunches like starch under his boots, reminding him of when he was a young woman and knew a dozen names for snow, all stolen from the dessert section of a cookbook. Whipped cream, soufflé, eggnog with a crisp burnt crust . . .

The doe is small and Ita will complain. She trusts Merthe only when she can see what he's accomplished in a day's work. She'll want proof that he hasn't been lazing around, or worse, training for Fight. As if he's ever neglected to feed the family. As if he'd ever put his own future before theirs. He swears under his breath. Five years as a man is too much to bear and he vows he will not lose the Fight again even if it means training every waking hour that he isn't hunting.

When he gets home, the children run to him shouting. He lets them tug at his beard, tries to hug them all at once. He senses them drifting away. No matter that he can still feel them tugging at his breasts. He is either the figure of authority, or the gentle giant. The clown. They come to him to play, but if the wound is deep, it is their mother that they run to.

"Did you hunt at all?" Ita asks.

He nods but says no more. He's been a man so long that this flesh has imprinted its own ways into his mind. Male silence comes easy these days; he revels in communication by grunts—or kisses. He knows how much it enrages her; he sometimes tries to be more verbal. But not now. Anything that'll annoy her may throw her off her game. She's won five years in a row. He needs all the help he can get.

He winks at the children and nods towards the shed. They run off, bringing back the doe between the six of them, the toddlers contributing by getting in the way. Serga doesn't go with them; shei is the eldest, almost ten. Merthe sometimes wonders if shei still remembers her first mother, still remembers Merthe in Ita's body. He fears shei doesn't: shei was so young when Ita and he swapped places. And yet, Serga stares at him with understanding, a look of pity even. Merthe shivers.

Ita hurries about and Merthe lets her serve him. In the warmth of the winter hut,

the children quickly lose their wraps. Merthe's clothes crack open like a husk, revealing thawing feet and a wide chest that has lost its summer tan. He looks upon Ita to do the same and, finally, she obliges. She's gained some weight since she took over that body. Her arms are rich and soft but Merthe isn't fooled: he knows first hand the damage they can inflict in combat. She bounces about, all hips and breasts, and the toddlers stare at her as if she were food, following her with eyes and mouths round as Os. Merthe lets his eyes roam her body, disguising one desire for the other. Ah, to be in those hips again. Yeah gods, to inhabit them! There's bounce to her skin and the marks of pregnancy stretch proud across her tummy. Some of them, Merthe put there when he bore Serga and Ramir.

She serves him and leans forward to whisper in his ear.

"Like what you see? Enjoy. You're not getting back in here any time soon."

He grabs her by the waist and tumbles her, eats her mouth, lets her feel the weight of his body on hers. The strength. She gasps in surprise and the children laugh. They're still androgens, and too young to read beneath the surface and into the hidden struggle between man and wife.

She giggles with them, making Merthe's ribs jiggle against hers. He lets her sit up—the children are awake—and nibbles her ear.

"I'll be in there in no time, darling," he says. He doesn't specify what exactly he means by that.

The weeks before Fight come and go so fast that Merthe wonders if he's growing old. Time always seems to speed up the further along you go. Three days before the match, Elgir walks up to the hut at dawn. He's their closest neighbor but Merthe doesn't know him that well. The People don't gather too close. Hunters need their space and the gender arrangement makes for frequent domestic fighting. Nobody likes to live close to noisy neighbors.

Merthe crawls out to meet him without disturbing Ita. The two men step inside the shed, neither knowing what to say.

Merthe offers Elgir a cup of tea.

"You'd make a good woman," Elgir says.

Merthe grunts at the compliment. "Yes, I did make a good wife."

"Ah yes, I forgot. The first two are yours, aren't they?"

It takes Merthe a second to realize Elgir means the children. Merthe nods to hide his shame. It seems impossible that he can't reclaim that body. And the whole village knows how much he wants it. He damns himself. It would not matter so much if he could appear not to care.

"Don't beat yourself up. She's so good she's scary," Elgir says.

Elgir himself has little to fear. He can easily defeat his partner, Samo. She's a small woman and not too fast. She's only been in a woman's body for a year and relied so much on muscle when she was a man that she never mastered technique. Looking at Elgir, Merthe understands how someone inhabiting that body could grow complacent. The man could fell a tree with a backhand cuff.

"How are things at home?" Merthe asks. It must be hard on Samo, knowing that she's going to lose. Elgir made a stunning fighter as a woman. The liteness that is Samo's bane was an advantage when Elgir was in control. Merthe remembers a particularly impressive kick roll in which a female Elgir was too fast for the eye. Merthe misses that lightness. Some days, he trudges around with the grace of a bear.

"Samo doesn't want to lose," Elgir replies.

"Who does?" says Merthe.

Elgir's eyes hold Merthe's for a second. "Some do. Some like being men. Some don't care either way," Elgir says.

Merthe blushes; nobody can judge another person's likes or dislikes, but some things are rarely said in public. Both men look down.

"The moss is thick this winter," Elgir says.

"Yes. It'll get cold fast."

It is so quiet that Merthe can hear the snow fall.

"Say, how about we hunt together. If we get something big, we can split. We can keep the women happy and still have time to train," Elgir suggests.

Merthe knows Ita will disapprove, so he grabs his things and goes with Elgir before she can object.

They spot a squirrelee wallowing up the dikes to get from pond to pond. It digs the snow with its front paws for nuts hidden the previous season. It's only as big as Eme, Merthe's youngest, but Merthe knows that most of its flesh is fat, good for thickening stews. It's a worthy catch, even if the women will complain about getting only half.

But when the time comes to cast his spear, Elgir freezes up. It's no time for questions, so Merthe shoots his arrow through air that tastes like sugared ice. The squirrelee falls.

Elgir goes ahead to retrieve it. Merthe wonders at the man's hesitation.

"Nice shot," Elgir says. He punches Merthe on the shoulder. "They say you cannot forget how to be a man anymore than you can forget how to suckle," Elgir says, "but I seem to forget every single time. One year is not enough to relearn it all. I was female for so long before that . . ."

Merthe remembers. Elgir only lost last season because she caught the bluwing cold. She barely escaped with her life—losing the Fight was a small thing compared to that. Everyone still wonders why Samo and Elgir didn't postpone their fight until after her recovery. Was Samo really that desperate to win?

"Then why is it that you wish to remain a man?" Merthe asks. It is a bold question and he hopes he is not mistaken. But intuition isn't just a woman's gift.

"It's not that . . ." Elgir says. Silence rings off the dusted pines. The men find a clearing and unpack their cheese-and-bread. The cheese has no smell. Merthe sniffs it, licks it.

"It's good," Elgir says.

"Yes. I wish I could taste it like she . . . like they . . . like the women do," Merthe says.

"Wouldn't make much difference. Smell's all that counts towards taste. This cheese tastes good because it has a hot bite to it, but the smell is rather bland. Trust me. I remember."

"But Ita says—"

"Ita is pulling your leg. This cheese has no smell."

Merthe curses Ita and tucks in. Sometimes he wonders why he wants to be a woman so much, since he can't even remember what it was like. But he's kidding himself. Even if he can't remember the particulars the overall impression remains. He recalls that first year after he defeated his first partner. Smells so much more vivid, skin so fine that it could feel the gentlest summer breeze, the touch of the sun . . . he knows of men and women down south who never change bodies. They are content to live their whole lives as one sex. Sometimes, in his darkest moments, Merthe wants to do likewise. If those men manage, why can't he?

But those men have the blessing of ignorance. They do not know what it is like to feel their bellies grow full. They do not understand the transforming pain of childbirth, the draining of milk from the nipple. The real smell of onion as it cooks.

"What is it then?" he asks. He's suddenly angry at Elgir, for taking this so lightly.

"I like being a woman," Elgir concedes. "I also like being a man. I like changing from one to the other. If you think about it, that's how all of this started, right? We swap bodies the better to understand each other's minds. We were meant to be bal-

anced, equal. That's why our women are faster than the eye and stronger than the ones down South. It makes us even. Swapping bodies was never meant to cause strife."

"Interesting theological argument. Maybe if we pray hard enough, we can all be women. What do you think?"

Elgir snorts half-frozen milk up his nose. His eyes tear and he laughs, but Merthe wonders if he's not also crying.

"It doesn't matter which body you're in. Sure, it's great to be a woman for the first few months after a transition, but after a while you simply get used to it and you don't make use of all those fantastic senses you're supposed to have. Senses work by comparison—if all of your passions are strong, they fade against each other as certainly as if they're all weak. That's why swapping frequently makes sense. That way you can renew the strong feelings often and spend enough time as a man to learn to appreciate the subtler pleasures too."

"What does Samo think of that?"

"She thinks I'm full of worm shit," Elgir says.

They burst out laughing.

Suddenly, Elgir stops laughing and starts crying. Men's tears, quiet, no fuss. But he doesn't try to hide them. Merthe wishes they were women so that they could hug each other and cry and then laugh at their silliness. He loves the way Ita's tears are unapologetic and arbitrary. They come and go like a morning sprinkle over nothing or they storm out and make him wish he'd never been born. Women have practice with crying. They communicate with tears. Men just sit there and cry.

But Elgir seeks him out to finish the last shudders in his arms.

"What is it?" Merthe asks.

"Samo doesn't like being a man."

"Neither do I. She'll just have to get used to—"

Elgir shuts his eyes and shakes his head.

"What is it? What is it?" Merthe asks.

"She doesn't take well to being a man. Not at all. She . . . he . . . is angry . . . all the time."

It sounds worse than just an argument. Merthe doesn't understand. "Why didn't you leave?" he asks.

But Merthe knows why he hasn't left. He hasn't left for the same reasons that Merthe hasn't divorced Ita. He thought things would get better. He hoped for change. The children stay with the mother . . .

"What exactly is it that she . . . he . . . does?"

"He's violent." Elgir bursts out crying and Merthe is confused. Even in a man's body, Samo is no match for Elgir. It makes no sense that Samo could batter Elgir. "It's not me she hurts," Elgir wails and, now, Merthe realizes he's crying from shame.

"The children. As a man, he hit Tine and Vis," Merthe says.

"That's why I let him win last winter. I thought once she was a woman again, it would all be over. It helped, at first. But last night, I saw a bruise on Tine's arm. The kid swears shei fell off a tree, but both of them are awfully quiet when their mother is around. Maybe I'm imagining things."

"She's still hitting them?" Merthe asks. "What are you doing here? What are you doing leaving them alone with her!" He stands up and paces, trying to decide whether to hit Elgir or run back towards his neighbor's house to save those children from their mother.

Elgir grabs Merthe's arm but Merthe wrenches it away. "How could you let that happen?" Merthe shouts. "You could have gone to the elders. Left without their approval, even. Stolen the children—whatever it took! How could you? How could you?"

He hoists his bag on his back and heads home, forgetting the squirrelee. Elgir runs after him. When Merthe doesn't stop, Elgir tackles him to the ground.

"Stop. Listen." Merthe stops struggling, less from the command than from the finality of a man twice his size pinning him to the ground.

"I'll save those kids, I promise you. I'll keep them safe from Samo if it's the last thing I do! But I'd rather do it smart. You know how the elders are, they'll argue and fret for months before reaching a decision and in the meantime, the kids will be alone with Samo. An angry Samo. A Samo who's been humiliated in public. I have failed them as a father and as a mother, but I won't compound one mistake with another."

Elgir stops pressing down quite so hard, but he doesn't let go. Both men sit up, hands on each other's arms. It's not a fight grip but it would take no effort to turn it into one.

"What are you going to do, then?" Merthe asks.

"I will win. I will win and leave, and I'll take the children with me."

Merthe lets go, sits back on the snow. As much as he hates the idea of Tine and Vis spending the next week alone at home with Samo, he realizes Elgir's way is best. As soon as he takes back his woman body, he'll be entitled to take the children where he pleases. Merthe tries not to feel sorry for Samo: she birthed them both.

"Do you know where you're going to go? Do you have family to help you out?" he asks.

"I'll worry about that later."

Merthe promises himself that he'll take food from his own mouth before Elgir's children go hungry. He's a strong hunter; he can hunt for two households. Ita will just have to accept it.

It's only later, back at home, that he realizes that he doesn't plan on being the hunter for the coming year.

Serga comes out to meet him at the door and it takes Merthe a moment to figure out why this surprises him. Serga hasn't been at the door with the other children for a while. The kid is too old to puppy around heir father.

Serga wants something. Heir eyes are impatient for Merthe to dispose of his hunting gear and head towards the shed to clean the squirrelee. Shei doesn't even cast a sidelong glance at the half-carcass, even though heir scathing looks are usually as incisive (and effective) as heir mother's.

Merthe takes off his coat and starts skinning. Serga stares on until Merthe motions towards the belly of the animal. There's enough work for two.

Serga hesitates and Merthe wonders if he has insulted the child by offering heir man's work. After all, no woman will touch an animal until it's clean and adolescents like to pretend they're women. But Serga takes heir own blade from heir apron and settles down in front of Merthe.

"It's happened," Serga whispers. "It's arrived."

Merthe hides his surprise and looks Serga up and down discreetly. Yes, there's an adult's budding body under the wraps. He hadn't expected it to happen so soon, but he'd always known his children would have to grow up. Serga isn't too young for her first bleeding.

"Have you told your mother?" Merthe asks, and regrets it. Serga has come to him, not Ita. He mustn't push heir away.

Shei shakes heir head.

"The other thing too? Or is it just your period?" Some adolescents don't have erections until a couple of years after their first bleeding.

Serga winces; Merthe is too blunt. He tries not to smile.

"The other thing . . . I think so."

Merthe grunts his understanding and waits.

"What do I do now?" Serga throws the knife to the ground. It rattles against the floorboards and shei looks up, scared. You don't treat a good knife like that. But Merthe gets up, wipes the knife on his pants and hands it back to Serga without scolding.

"You don't have to Fight this season, or even the next. You can still be our child for a little longer, if that's all right with you," he whispers and places his hand on heir shoulder.

Serga nods and clasps heir apron.

"But why do I have to Fight at all? Why can't I just stay like this always?"

"Fighting is fun. You'll come to enjoy it," he says.

"What if I can't? What if I'm really bad? What if—"

"It's okay to lose."

"Mother says—"

"Your mother is a very gifted woman, but in some things, she acts like an idiot." Merthe wonders if those words are his, or Elgir's. "She's so proud of winning that she pretends that losing is a big deal. You're going to win some years and lose some years and, either way, you're going to be happy. You're going to love your children and your spouse. You're going to enjoy good food and soft clothes. The differences are there, but the things that matter remain the same."

It's a white lie, but the words spring from his mouth with such a force that Merthe wonders if they aren't true.

Elgir and Samo are the first to Fight each season and their combat casts a long shadow on everyone else's match. Merthe wonders what Fight will be like when Elgir and Samo are no longer the item leading the way.

Their combat is short; Elgir seems too sad to care about putting on a good show. Samo comes at him in a blur and the men in the crowd gasp, always surprised at how fast a woman can move.

Samo has learned from previous failures. She never sits still and blows punctuate her every motion. Elgir stands still and takes them, face flat as granite. Merthe wonders if he plans to win through attrition.

Suddenly, his arm shoots out and he catches Samo across the chest. They crash down, Elgir breaking their fall so that Samo lands almost softly, cocooned inside his arms.

He holds her much longer than necessary, after the bell has rung, after the cheering is over. He holds her after Samo has stopped thrashing in anger and frustration, after the children stop hollering. It is their final embrace and Elgir makes it last. This is how Elgir loves, fervently. Even after the unthinkable, he cannot bear to let go.

When the crowd is no longer interested, Elgir presses his palm against Samo's and Merthe can feel his own pores opening up in sympathy, the clever little soul-holes through which bodies are exchanged. It only lasts a second but Merthe knows that those two feel their minds entwined into eternity.

And then it's done, and Samo in his new male body pushes Elgir away so hard that Merthe winces. Elgir stands up, wearing that body with a grace Samo could never

READERS: If you are having problems finding *Asimov's Science Fiction* at your favorite retailer, we want to help. First let the store manager know that you want the store to carry *Asimov's*. Then send us a letter or postcard telling us the full name and address of the store (with street name and number, if possible). Write to us at: *Asimov's Science Fiction*, Dept. NS, 6 Prowitt St., Norwalk, CT 06855-1220. Thank you!

muster. She nods her head, a last goodbye, and whistles for the children. By now, even Samo must know they won't be coming home tonight.

That evening, Merthe arrives home with half a nme bird. There's hardly any meat on it and Ita will have to add some sausage to thicken the stew, but nobody will go hungry, not Ita and the children, not Elgir and hers. Sometimes you're lucky, sometimes you aren't. That's the way hunting goes.

When Ita sees the bird she blanches, and Merthe braces for a harangue on hunting and responsibility. But Ita is too angry to bait or mock. Merthe has never seen her like this. She storms back into the house while Merthe goes to the shed to clean the bird.

Dinner is silent and Ita hustles the children to bed long before their bedtime. One of the younger ones whimpers, but Serga cuts heir short with a pinch which Merthe pretends not to see. He's too exhausted to fight heir too.

"Who is she?" Ita whispers after the children are in their bunks.

"What?"

"Don't play games with me, Merthe, who's the woman you keep bringing meat to. Taking it from your children's mouths!"

Merthe laughs "It's not . . . I'm not . . ."

"Don't go telling me you hunted with Elgir again! She's a woman now, Samo can hunt for her. I don't know why I believed you the first time, men hunt alone, but I was so trusting—"

"What is it that really bothers you, Ita? Me with another woman or your stupid pantry? It's bursting at the edges, for every god's sake. You give food away else it rot before we can eat it! Is that what I am to you? The oaf who keeps your stomach full?"

Ita opens her mouth, but manages only a gurgle. She grabs her coat. Polar winter sweeps into the house as she opens the door. The cold steals the breath from his mouth; the sharpness from his brain. It takes him a second to react and take off after her, wrapped only in his sleeping blanket.

The snow outside is knee deep and she isn't wearing shoes. He scoops her up from a drift and drapes her across his shoulders. She doesn't resist.

"You idiot, don't you see I do it for you?" she wails in his ear over the wind. "Everyone knows you're such a good hunter that I have food to spare. My mother, the neighbors . . . As long as my pantry is full, nobody can question us or our marriage. Whenever those hags at the market start gossiping about how I should find a stronger Fighter, I give them meat, pelts. That shuts them up. They don't talk, at least not to my face."

Merthe pushes the door open and stomps his feet until he feels them. He doesn't know what to think, much less what to say. He puts Ita down and goes to fetch the liquor. More than half the bottle is missing. He stares pointedly at Ita.

"Don't look at me. I think Serga has started drinking behind my back." She sounds annoyed, but not terribly worried. Adolescents will be adolescents. It's hard to figure out one's body when one is so new to it, especially when one is neither a man nor a woman, but a compendium of impulses with no way to work them off. Merthe's lips twitch as he remembers his own childhood.

"There is no woman, Ita." He sits next to her by the hearth. "Samo and Elgir have broken up. I promised Elgir that her children wouldn't starve. I'm hunting for them for now, at least until Elgir finds a man. That shouldn't take long."

"Can't Samo hunt for them? He has a responsibility towards those children!"

"Samo isn't going to be hunting. Elgir can hunt small game by herself, but not with the children tagging along."

"Really? You must be exaggerating. I can't think of a man who'll visit his children and not bring something . . ."

"Samo isn't setting foot in Elgir's house."

"Well, that's just wrong! I can understand being angry, but keeping a man from his children—"

"You don't know the half of it!" Merthe sets the glass down and frowns: he hadn't intended to shout. "It's bad, Ita, it's really bad."

"Then tell me," she says. *You never tell me anything.* After so long, Merthe hears the words even when she doesn't utter them.

"Samo hits the kids." That gets her attention. He explains in as few words as he can, glad that she's finally decided to shut up and listen.

"Those poor kids. Those poor poor kids," she says.

Merthe tries to explain how angry he is at Elgir for letting it happen.

"You can't judge. You don't know what Elgir was going through at the time . . ."

"And you do?" Surely, this isn't about him!

"Of course not." She puts a cool hand on his forehead. Despite how angry he is, she soothes him. Ita and he work best together when they do not speak. He wonders why it can't always be like that. A life in silence. Sometimes, his reticence to speak is just that, a desire for this quiet companionship. It is only with words that they hate each other.

When his time to Fight comes, Merthe tells himself the outcome doesn't really matter. He tells himself the same lies he told Serga, trying to believe them with a child's fervor. He fastens his boots and sets out.

A crowd is waiting for him. As he approaches, Elgir joins him, arriving at the square from the left. They walk the last stretch together, Elgir's children trailing from her skirt.

"How are things going?" Merthe asks.

"I should be the one asking that!" Elgir laughs. "Are you afraid?"

"No." Surprisingly, it's the truth. He's too wound up to be scared. "Do you still believe what you said in the forest the other day? Do you still think it's such a good idea to swap bodies from time to time? Or has that precious woman's body changed your mind?"

Elgir laughs. "Oh, yes, I believe it. We are trapped inside these bodies. We've learned since childhood that women do this or that and we never dare to break free of that mold. We're as pitiful as the men and women down South, who only know one way of living, except that we don't have the excuse of ignorance. But hell, it does feel good to sniff my children with this nose again. I'll grant you that." She turns sharply and her children squeal and take off. Obviously, "smelling the children" is a game with them.

They turn into the square where a dozen men cheer when they see Merthe. Merthe turns around but she nods at him to go. She's got her arms full of toddler.

"Do your best." Her face looks pinched. Merthe realizes that if he wins, she will lose her hunter.

He salutes each of the four metallic pillars that mark the Fighting ground. They are made from the remnants of a ship that brought the People here from the sky. Or so the elders say. It seems impossible that people should sail through air. It is true, however, that bodies may only be exchanged within their embrace and only after Fight. Years ago, Merthe and Ita, like all newlyweds, spent some time trying to game the rules and learned that the only result was temporary impotence and a headache that lasted for hours.

On a whim, he jumps into the Fighting square and seeks out Ita before combat begins. He stares at the judge, dares him to object, and takes Ita to the side.

"Are you nervous?" he asks.

She looks at him suspiciously. He sighs, takes her hand and brings the palm to his lips. Her eyes lighten up.

"It's just a game, Ita."

"Maybe it is to you. That's why you always lose."

He lets go of her hand, turns to the crowd. People are coming from villages that he hasn't even been to. He wishes he could confide in Ita, but everything he says will be used against him.

"I'm worried about Elgir," he blurts. "Who will hunt for her when I'm a woman?"

Ita smiles. She thinks it's banter. "I think you'll be able to keep her in meat and gravy for a while yet."

"Really? You would not object?"

"Are you serious?"

It's no use. He heads towards his corner and starts preparing.

Roll of drums; the combatants step up to the judge. Merthe wonders whether he should try to imitate Elgir. Maybe he can just take Ita's hits and try to snatch an advantage when he sees it. Surely, it would be a lot less tiresome than fighting. He is so tired of fighting all the time.

But then he realizes that this is Fight, not just any fight. His verbal skills do not matter and since combatants must remain silent, Ita's wit cannot hurt him inside the ring. Suddenly, he feels protected by those four pillars. He has a good half hour of silence ahead of him, maybe an hour if he can make the fight last. He yearns for intimacy without the burden of words. And there is nothing more intimate than violence.

The drums are still and the crowd holds their breaths. Ita starts bouncing and jabbing, trying to circle around him and hit him when he blinks. She moves fast—always a good strategy for a woman—and attempts to bring him down with repeated blows.

Her first hit catches him unawares and he staggers back. No, Elgir's strategy won't work. There is blood in his mouth. He's supposed to hold still, he knows. Maybe feint a bit, watch for patterns and fell her with one decisive blow. Those same muscles that lend force to his blows suck up his energy. Unlike Ita, he cannot jump around forever. He is supposed to preserve his strength, not to commit, strike only when he can win.

But he is so tired of doing what he's supposed to and maybe Elgir is right and we get caught up in patterns, live life within patterns, pushing ourselves beyond our limits because a man should lift that much, throw that far. And maybe, just maybe, Merthe realizes, we do the opposite and fall pitifully short because we've been told our bodies have less endurance than our wife's.

Merthe starts bouncing. His feet know the way. Women fight like they dance, his mother taught him, and he was always such a good dancer.

Ita's rhythm lets up in surprise and he jabs, but she ducks in time and starts bouncing again. He loves her technique and mirrors her as they spin round and round. Merthe is the ugly sibling, echoing her elder's every move, struggling to copy what can only be born of natural grace.

Ita doesn't know how to hit a moving target. She hasn't fought with a mobile partner for a long time.

His breath is labored; she hardly breaks a sweat. She starts sweating; the pain in his chest won't let up. She pants and swerves; his vision clouds but he sees the gap in her defense and punches through.

She crashes down and he falls right after. For a second, he wonders if she's all right. He put himself in that blow, his loves, his wants, his strengths and weaknesses. He wonders if it was too much for her. But she groans and sits up, spits blood and, of all things, laughs.

"Well, you got me there."

"I'm sorry," he says.

"Oh no, you're not. You won."

He lies back, head spinning. Yes, he won. His chest still hurts and he wonders how bad it is.

The bell rings. She crawls up against him, sets her palm against his and they're off into the limbo of joy. Her mind rises up to him. For a second, both of them are in his body and hers hangs, limp, behind. He creeps in, wondering if the beams still hold in this castle which he's left so long ago. Merthe draws a breath which is oh, so sweet. She smells the male sweat of Ita next to her.

But no. Two women need a hunter and a young androgen needs to learn that being a man isn't so bad. She pushes back into the old body. He regains control and shoves Ita into hers. She was so fond of her female form that it seems a pity to tear her from it. Plus, she made a terrible husband.

Ita tumbles away from him and he sees disbelief in her eyes.

"Really?"

"Really."

"You're leaving me! You're leaving with her!"

It takes a moment for him to understand what she's saying. But, of course, she cannot fathom why anyone would want to be a man. The only explanation that she will consider is that Merthe plans to start a new life with Elgir and that he needs a man's body for that.

"I'm not going with her." He doesn't say he's not leaving, though, because he's not quite sure what he'll do. He can support both women, but he doesn't have the strength for either. He needs time, alone, in silence. He knows just the place for that.

The judge walks up and hesitates before signaling the end of the transition. The elders squirm, then shrug their shoulders. Merthe has won: he may do as he likes.

That night, there's scratching at the door of the shed.

"Does your mother know you're here?" he asks a trembling Serga standing by the doorway.

"No. I think. I don't think so, she was asleep."

Merthe lets heir in, moves his quilts to a corner and places a stack of blankets next to the fire for heir to sleep in. Shei stomps heir feet all the way to bed, and Merthe stays awake until the shivering melts into regular breathing and only soft childish hairs peek out from beneath the covers. He'll wake heir before sunrise and make heir go back to bed inside the house. Ita mustn't know that shei's fled to him for comfort after their separation. Merthe may be too confused to know what he wants just yet, but he doesn't want to hurt Ita. Whether he can live with her or not is a different matter. ○

VISIT OUR WEBSITE

www.asimovs.com

Don't miss out on our lively forum, movie reviews, podcasts, controversial and informative articles, and classic stories.

Log on today!

ANIMUS RIGHTS

John Shirley

John Shirley's many books include *City Come A-Walkin', Black Glass: The Lost Cyberpunk Novel*, and his newest, *Bleak History*, from Simon and Schuster. He was a screenwriter for *The Crow* and has written television scripts for *Deep Space Nine* and *Poltergeist: The Legacy*. His first story for us in twenty-one years examines the human cost of an ageless conflict between two utterly alien life forms.

Near Jamaica Bay, New York, 1887

"And why should you go shooting again, Andrew?" Wilamina demanded. "You've gone twice this week. You promised me an autumn promenade. The leaves are splendid."

"You shall have your autumn promenade, my dear," Andrew replied, stuffing his coat pockets with shotgun shells. The gun club provided shells but they were not to his liking. "But first I shall go target shooting. They have a new machine that swings feathered bags, does a capital job. The Colonel's servants crank them by—always cringing under the shot though it rarely comes near them . . ."

Wilamina was at the oval, silver-framed hall mirror, adjusting her ivory choker, patting the red-brown hair piled luxuriantly on her head, frowning in the gaslight glow—and Andrew thought that he had seen that prim scowl far too often.

Something emerges in me, he thought, *and she will become irrelevant.*

What a strange thought! It had come suddenly, unbidden, as actual words in his mind—and he rarely thought in words.

But as he picked up his shotgun, carrying it loose under his arm, he realized he'd had more than one such incident, these past few weeks.

"Seven years of peaceful marriage, and suddenly you're a man of blood," Wilamina said suddenly, calling after him as he went to the door, its leaded glass panels bluing the dusty late-afternoon sunlight. Something plaintive, worried in her voice. Her anxiety came out in a rush. "You're a man of banking—you're not a hunter. You were always fit, to be sure, but all this running about at dawn of late, huffing and puffing, throwing javelins . . . and now shooting. Pheasant hunting. Is it a consequence of turning thirty? Some men become unsure of themselves . . ."

"Just a hobby, my darling dear," he said, hurrying out the door before she should press him on matters he didn't understand himself.

Andrew inhaled the spicy scent of leaves fallen from the tall, noble elms lining the cobblestoned road, and felt a rising exhilaration, a buoyant freeness, that seemed to sweep him along the wooden walkway, past the gaunt houses.

He came to the corner and stopped—uncertain. To the left, after a brisk walk, were the streetcars, drawn by teams of horses, that would take him to the club, and his target shooting. To the right . . .

It was exactly at that moment that Andrew knew he was not going target shooting at all.

He was going the opposite way; he was going to the small wood, to the south. He almost knew why. Not quite yet.

It will come. The game is afoot.

There, words again, ringing in his mind. Somehow, though, they felt like his own words; his own assertion, coming from some place deep within.

He broke the double-barreled shotgun open, and thumbed two rounds. Was distantly aware of Old Man Worster watching him disapprovingly from his porch.

The devil with Old Man Worster.

The rising lightness, the giddy exuberance made him want to spin on his heel and fire a shot at Worster's porch, perhaps shoot out that gaudy, peacock-shaped front door panel. *"Sorry, Worster—out hunting fowl, thought it was a peacock, ha ha!"* No: he would need his ammunition.

He stalked off to the right, the twelve-gauge now at ready in his hands, hurrying to the end of the road, the path that led into the quarter-mile-wide strip of elms and maples, where children played in the day, and sparkling couples disported of an evening. Taking a walk, not long ago, he had seen several tow-headed boys playing "War Between the States" here, in this shadowy wood. The sight had struck a chord within him.

He was not fifty strides into the wood, just within sight of the gray-blue of Jamaica Bay, glimpsed between the trees, when the shot came, hitting a maple trunk just in front of him.

Too soon, as usual, Andrew thought, crouching behind the tree, chuckling. Typically, you have given away your position . . .

As usual? But he'd never been shot at before. And who had fired the shot?

Adversary.

He leaned slightly forward, looked up to see the fresh yellow gouge where the bullet had cut the dull-green bark of the young maple, about six feet up. Andrew's height. The shot had come from the southwest.

He backed away, stood, spun, and, heart hammering with primal delight, sprinted between the trees to the northeast, trying to flank Adversary.

To flank . . . whom? Who was . . .

Adversary. As always . . .

And then his identity returned, erupting in fullness, like a geyser washing through his mind, hissing away the fearful, mealy mouthed Andrew Chapham, the minor officer of a minor bank—and now he was the one called *Animus*. That was the game-name of his true self. And he felt not a qualm, not a sputter of regret at letting Andrew go. He had been so many others, these centuries past; they had always seemed feeble, sketchy compared to his fundamental identity.

But thoughts of Andrew Chapham were fading, becoming shadows at the back of his mind, cast by light from outside a cave; he was rushing toward that light, and emerging fully . . . and seeing Adversary grinning at him, currently a stocky blond man in white and black sailor's uniform; a man with a curling yellow mustache and a prominent chin. He stood about twelve yards away, on the other side of a waist-high, mossy boulder, head cocked to aim along the rifle wedged against his shoulder.

Animus had just time to think, Ah, that's the form he's taken, I've seen him scouting me at—

They fired almost simultaneously; Adversary was a little faster. Andrew—Animus,

now—was forced to fire from his hip, both barrels, and most of the shot went wild, caroming from the outcropping of granite, scoring away moss; but a scattering of pellets struck across Adversary's white, black-trimmed sailor's shirt, rocking him a few steps back, and Animus was staggering back himself, as if they were doing a horn-pipe together.

He felt it, then, just under his sternum—the bullet had struck him a moment before, but he'd not felt the pain till this second; the weakness spreading from the wound, the seizing up of his lungs. That was one problem with choosing this planet—these primate bodies were comparatively fragile.

Animus felt himself sinking to his knees, hot blood gurgling up in his throat to dribble from the corner of his mouth, as he fumbled the empty shells from his shotgun, thumbed in two more slippery rounds—but Adversary was there, striding up to him, cocking the rifle, blood streaming in thin trickles from a spray of small holes in his shirt, his mouth stretched wide in joy as he prepared for the *coup de grace* . . .

Animus was annoyed, realizing that Adversary was giving him a moment to swing the shotgun around, just to make things more interesting. "I don't need your extra chance . . ." He couldn't finish, blood choking off the words, and he squeezed the shotgun triggers, but Adversary was within reach, cracking Animus across the head with the rifle barrel, so that the shotgun bellowed harmlessly into the ground, and he fell to his side in a cloud of gunsmoke, sighing ruefully as he waited for the bullet in the back of his head, thinking, *I know we agreed this would be a Sudden Confrontation but this abruptness hardly seems—*

Animus never completed the thought, as the rifle bullet shattered his head—and his lightbody was forced out of the cellular mass, the primate form that people had called Andrew Chapman.

Still embodied in the blond-haired, mustachioed, lantern-jawed man in the sailor's shirt, Adversary gazed triumphantly down at the Andrew body: shattered, still twitching though all intelligence had drained from it.

Almost as an afterthought, the heart stopped beating.

Then Adversary looked up at Animus—at the lightbody that had departed the shattered primate body. . . .

And Adversary's own primate body collapsed, as if its joints had dissolved. No longer occupied, it simply fell; its heart switched off by Adversary on the way out, the way a man switches off a light when he's leaving a house.

Adversary's lightbody shimmered, golden-green, across from Animus's own, whose colors were more red-purple with flecks of flaring yellow.

"*I knew if I shot at you, early on, from that angle, you'd dart to the left and I could cut you off at that boulder,*" Adversary said, emanating glee. He didn't say it in words, exactly, nothing so simple; it was not a communication that Andrew Chapham would have understood, but that was the general meaning. "*You're starting to be too predictable! And yet you think I'm predictable!*"

"*You shot me in almost the same way during the Napoleonic wars, you remember? With that musket!*"

"*What a feeble redcoat you made! It was better during the Civil War. But this time . . .*"

"*We might have had a bit more tactics before Sudden Confrontation,*" Animus interrupted testily. "*But the woman I was married to was annoying me. I had to invest so much time in being Chapham . . .*"

There was a pause; a sense of puzzlement in the air. "*You were aware enough to be annoyed? Your Fundamental should have been in full dormancy. You've got to go back and retrain your Focal Point if this keeps up.*"

"*Nonsense! I can get it back to full dormancy on my own. Now—next time, let's do a broad, tactical conflict.*"

"The primates are creating explosive possibilities in Europe. A little time, and I can spark that one. Perhaps an assassination in the right quarter."

"There are new weapons coming. Let's use them all!"

"You mean generalships? It's been a while since we were generals, sending armies against one another. The potential . . . Even a colonel could do much . . . We could use psychic dominance to prod the generals, once we'd gotten close enough . . ."

"Much preparation would be needed. We shall need to influence key individuals before nesting. I wish we had the technology to enter adult bodies, instead of nesting in fetal forms, waiting till maturity."

"That's forbidden technology. And it's not much of a wait, really, for us. A few decades at most. We need the rest."

A young couple, strolling through the woods in search of privacy, came upon the bloody scene: the two awkwardly sprawled bodies. And they saw the shimmering, vaguely humanoid shapes hovering beside the corpses.

The lightbodied, Adversary and Animus, became aware of the strolling couple and flitted upward, into the gathering mists of late afternoon, vanishing into the high upper airs; the pimply young man gaped; the sheep-eyed girl put a pale hand to her heaving bosom . . . and went into a career of spiritism soon after, thinking she had seen ghosts. But to Adversary and Animus, her species were so insubstantial, so evanescent—they were the "ghosts."

V ERDUN, FRANCE, 1916

One hundred thousand shells had hammered the fortress of Verdun, and Holdrich Von Stang, in full emergence for several weeks now, was worried that perhaps his enemy had been prematurely killed by the bombardment. Of course, many enemies had been killed—but he was concerned for his particular enemy. His enemy who was also his best friend. Adversary.

But no, Adversary would have appeared to him in lightbody, if he'd been killed.

Von Stang collapsed the little brass telescope and put it in the pocket of his great-coat, leaving his hand in there with it to warm the knuckles against the drizzly February morning, stamping some feeling into his feet on the planks of the railroad car. A little ways down the flatcar, enlisted men passed wooden crates of supplies, in a human chain, to two drays pulled by teams of mules; the mules snorted visibly in the cold air. The Kaiser's soldiers, gray figures in long coats and broad, dented helmets, weary from poor rest and thin rations, worked slowly but steadily on. Good soldiers. Many would be dead tomorrow. Spent like so many pennies. Sometimes he wondered . . .

No. Concern for the primates was irrational, mere distraction. Why had it arisen at all?

He mused on the question only distantly—a warmth was spreading through him, as he considered the battered fortress of Verdun, a quarter-mile away. He could just make out the rising columns of blue smoke, a consequence of the shelling. Reports had come in that the allies were far from destroyed; more than half of them had survived the bombardment, in deep trenches, cellars fortified by the British and French. But naturally he had warned Adversary about the shelling, with a temporary mental contact. He and Adversary had been emerged for almost a month.

Erich von Falkenhayn, the German Chief of Staff, had nearly gone along with a plan to push for domination on the Eastern Front. But that was inconvenient for Adversary and Animus, and Adversary had used psychic dominance, a remote telepathic push, to nudge Von Falkenhayn toward another plan—to "bleed France white" at the Western front, beginning with Verdun.

They had used two prongs to encourage the war, and bring these armies together

on this ideal battleground; had used remote telepathic domination, along with the strategic influence of their primate embodiments.

Their primates—Colonel von Stang of the German army and the British Major, Simpson—had sometimes wondered, early on, why they had signed up to become military men; why they had applied for certain posts—as the unconscious blueprints played out in them . . .

"Colonel?"

Von Stang looked down at his pale orderly, shook his head in disapproval. "Your boots are muddy, Corporal Gromin," he said, in German. He enjoyed playing his part. "You are bivouacked in the officers' tents; you do not have the excuse of the trenches."

"I beg your pardon sir, I thought it best I come directly with the information, and the path across the field . . ."

"Yes, yes—you've come to tell me an enemy patrol has slipped out of the fortress?"

Gromin looked at him in surprise. "Yes sir! You knew already!"

"Oh yes . . . I anticipated something of the sort." He chuckled, feeling the excitement rise in him at the imminence of the final confrontation between Animus and Adversary, for this particular war—finally, this time.

It was taking longer than usual, though, to *fully* emerge into his host body. He didn't quite feel himself yet. The exhilaration was half-suppressed. This worried Animus. He felt himself oddly over-mingled with Von Stang. Perhaps Adversary had been right, last embodiment, in that New York woods. Perhaps he needed retraining.

But he must deal with that later, after he or Adversary was "killed." And that would happen today, in all probability. Till now, they'd sent waves of men against one another—or used psychic dominance, remote telepathic urgings, to urge the generals to order it. But the time had come for face to face Confrontation.

"Gromin—I have made a list of men to accompany us. We will go to meet this foray. They think they have gotten away from the fortress . . . to escape, or to spy on us. We will prove them wrong."

Naturally, Von Stang—Animus—had moved troops away from the southwest corner of the fortress, so that Adversary could slip out with his patrol.

Half an hour later, six men trailed behind Gromin and Von Stang as they tramped down the muddy road, rifles cold and heavy in their hands. The men had been surprised, seeing that Von Stang was going to lead the patrol himself. A colonel leading a patrol, and carrying a rifle, too, as well as a sidearm—unheard of!

The landscape about Verdun was ideal for their next confrontation; for a glorious battlefield drama. They liked to set up the field of battle carefully but make their confrontational decisions as spontaneously as possible. Perhaps, after all, he might surprise Adversary by holding back, today. This might not be their last confrontation of the war, after all. Von Stang might withdraw at the last moment—and later, might have Falkenhayn assassinated, then use psychic domination to have himself installed as Chief of Staff. They could extend the war for a number of extra years, if they chose.

Yes. He would have a good skirmish with Adversary here, but choose to withdraw before fatality . . . unless things turned against him too soon.

He might get caught up in the fight; might not withdraw in time. Still, there would be another battle, if this one was fatal; there was always another, in other bodies. They had been doing this for more than two thousand revolutions of this planet around its sun, and its possibilities for war were not at all used up . . .

He felt the waves of exhilaration building in him as he trudged toward the approximate area of confrontation. But despite the mounting inner flame of coming combat, at some lower level he still felt obscurely troubled. Just before nesting himself within the fetus that would become Von Stang, he'd found himself caught up in a certain ennui. It was tiresome to be so coupled to embodiment. Yes, the instinct-tem-

plates in the primate brain made the combat encounters vastly more intense. Long ago, embodied in the twelve-limbed creatures of a watery planet under triple suns, Adversary and Animus had engaged in almost operatically grand combat in the undersea canyons of that world, and it had been deeply satisfying—that combination of reproductive ecstasy and brutal rending, the spurting of many torn limbs, the intricacy of leverage and strategy. But it had lacked the white-hot savagery, the violent inventiveness they'd found in the primates of this world; this "Earth." These primates seemed a bump-up, an increase of intensity, and Adversary and Animus had continued their competition on this planet—so much more than mere games—for countless embodiments, life after life, recording all in sensory nodes for later analysis. Much later: they were of a race that commonly lived above half a million Earthly years.

But perhaps they'd remained here too long. Von Stang . . . Animus . . . had felt something drawing him toward an empathic overlap with the primates—quite unnatural. A subtle, external nudging. Was it psychic dominance? From what quarter?

"Sir, I see movement in the hedgerows . . ." Gromin said, his low voice breaking in on Animus's thoughts.

There, to the north, across a field of mown hay, booted feet could be just made out in narrow openings, between the bases of shrubs, at the bottom of the farther hedgerow. *Adversary and his soldiers*. The marchers seemed to be moving toward a gap in the hedgerow in the far corner of the field.

"Men, listen closely . . ." Animus issued his orders and his followers jogged as quietly as possible up the road to the nearer edge of the hedgerow, while "Colonel Von Stang" and Corporal Gromin hurried into the field, along the closer side of the hedgerow, keeping low as they edged toward the gap. Animus was planning to have his men at the road draw fire from Adversary, then return fire, as heavily as possible; Adversary would retreat through the opening in the hedgerow, tumbling through helter skelter, to run carelessly into fire from Gromin and his Colonel.

But Adversary's side fired first—they'd flattened down and were firing through the small breaks in the hedgerow, near the roots, and bullets cracked close by "Von Stang"—one of them caught Gromin in the throat, so that he seemed to twist sideways, dropping his weapon, clutching at his gouting throat as he fell onto the sodden turf.

Too bad, he'd been a useful tool.

Animus fired at a muzzleflash, and sprinted toward the larger opening, heard gunfire from the road beyond the hedgerow—his men firing at Adversary's soldiers—and a shout from a wounded man.

He came to an old tree stump beside the hedgerow, went to one knee, reloading his rifle, hoping to pick off some of Adversary's followers—perhaps wound Adversary himself, rather than kill him—his heart pounding, blood racing, the delightful energy of low embodiment racing through his nervous system . . .

And then he saw the grenade. One of the new "Mills bombs" the British Army was using, with its segmented surface—but someone had thrown it about thirty feet behind his position, and he was able to shift to cover on the other side of the tree stump.

But instead of falling and exploding short, the grenade stopped in mid-air, and changed direction.

"What! That is not allowed!" he shouted, as, defying physics, the grenade flew right for him.

He turned to run from it—and the grenade changed direction again, followed him . . . and exploded just over his head, quite removing it from his body.

"And I am telling you, I did not interfere with that grenade!" Adversary insisted.

They were within a small concealment sphere about a half mile over the battlefield; it looked more or less like a cloud to the primates, far below.

"You threw the grenade, did you not?" Animus demanded.

"Initially—yes. I did—I threw it to confuse you, and drive you into the open. I knew it was not going to hit you. I did not cause it to change direction! I don't even have those kinds of skills! Levitation discomposes my thinking center. Perhaps you were mistaken—"

"I am not mistaken," Animus insisted. "It changed direction in mid-air! If you didn't do it, then whom? I'm not aware of others of our kind competing on this planet. And the primates are not gifted with telekinesis. Who, then?"

"I have thought to feel another kind of interference—a tugging of mental energy, from somewhere outside; tangling me with the primates. Perhaps a subtle psychic dominance. Who, I ask again—and why?"

"The answer must be in why. Our competition here was cut short. Someone wanted to end our participation in this war."

"Who would want to interfere with us? The primates are unaware of us! And incapable of interfering. Perhaps it's a competition vandal—there are some about, entertaining themselves. If so—they're young, with short attention spans. The competition vandal may go away if we wait long enough. There will be other wars."

"Yes. This war bears in it the seed of another war, to sprout in the same garden . . . We can nurture those seeds, before nesting in new primates . . ."

Other wars came along, soon, but they were unavailable to Adversary and Animus—they had to nest in new fetuses, for some years, while the Chinese Civil War went on; while other conflicts raged without their help; without their participation.

But then came World War Two.

They didn't have to foment World War Two, it had a psychotic life of its own—still, they fanned its flames where they could, their embodiments not understanding why they did what they did.

But all primates, even those not occupied by alien lightbodies, were confused, usually, about why they did what they did.

NORTH AFRICA

A pale blue sky; a yellow horizon rippling with the noonday heat; a rolling, sandy plain; a scattering of fletchy little trees. All this the young lieutenant saw from the open hatch of the *Panzerkampfwagen*. He saw, too, the muscular cloud of brown dust rolling like a djinn across the land from the East: the American armor, its cavalry. One division of Eisenhower's army.

The young lieutenant, Otto Meterling, was directing his rumbling Panzer in the front lines of Rommel's latest attempt at feinting and flanking, but the allies were getting wise to Rommel's methods, and it appeared they were not falling into the trap.

Meterling loved being in the tank. Despite the dryness in his mouth; despite the taste of oil, the sun's heat flung in his face from the metal around him. He loved the bulk of mechanical armor all about him, a metallic extension of his will, designed to crush enemies and turn their blows aside; he loved its grinding treads, its growling engine.

Meterling coughed in a swirl of exhaust fumes, and rubbed grit from his eyes. He would need his goggles soon. How he loved it!

But he knew, somehow, that his true battle this day would not be with Eisenhower's mechanical cavalry. It would come from another direction.

Now, how do I know that? But I do know . . . I know that Adversary is coming . . . perhaps from the sky. Paratroopers. He is likely a paratrooper.

Adversary . . . Animus.

It had been building all morning; last night there had been strange dreams, vivid dreams of many battles: of Romans in armor coming at him, while he whipped his chariot horses on in the service of his Pharaoh.

And this morning he'd awakened with the taste of blood in his mouth—someone else's blood. A memory of a fight on the Iberian peninsula, fading even as he opened his eyes. He'd had to kill the man with his teeth, when his sword broke at the hilt. A thousand years earlier.

Just a dream. Or was it a memory, relived?

He watched the sky. Adversary would come from the sky.

There! An American divebomber, perhaps a "helldiver," appearing as a rapacious dot against the sky to the northeast, taking shape, wings and fuselage gaining definition as it approached.

It is him . . .

Meterling was becoming Animus, his fundamental identity surging up. He laughed joyfully—to the great puzzlement of his frightened, stifled Panzer crew.

So Adversary thinks he has the edge here, coming from the sky! But Animus had prepared, there was certain ordnance for this, he did not need a direct hit on that plane if he used a flak shell. Now he understood why he'd brought the shells here—these were almost unknown to the panzers. He lowered himself excitedly into the tank, and barked the orders.

"The special shells! Load them! You wanted to know what they're for, you're about to find out, we're soon to be strafed . . . and . . ."

He broke off, staring at the rack of shells waiting to go into the Panzer's cannon. It was difficult to see here, in the cramped, light-stabbed, dusty dimness, but the shells stood out unnaturally.

They were glowing.

They were becoming brighter, brighter . . . glimmering with red, then white light, brighter and brighter, humming within.

"Get out!" he shouted, climbing up through the hatch—but it was too late. Once more, too late.

The shells exploded. The tank was consumed by a hungry fireball.

And Meterling with it.

Drifting far over the North African desert . . .

"And again I ask, if it was not you—who was it?"

"I told you, Animus—some competition vandal. A child. Maybe a five-thousandish."

"With such skills? It seems improbable. I only know I was blown to smithereens before our confrontation could begin. Not to mention my crew."

"Well, yes. Not to mention them . . . would be normal."

Animus ignored this dig. "Almost thirty years as that Meterling. The food alone . . . unbearable."

"You were aware of his eating? You were that much engaged?"

"I know: it is strange."

"Something of the sort happened to me, in my American counterpart," Adversary admitted. "A feeling of taking part in the man, more than I wanted to. I wanted to sleep and there I was, aware of his academy physics class."

"We'll wait them out. This time we'll return to the Sourceworld and fully restore. But we'll meet back here . . . there is sure to be another war in this part of the world." He gazed down at the desert. "I like this part of the planet. It has such possibilities. And think of the weapons to come!"

Iraq, Near the Border with Syria, 2008

Another desert; another hot day. A US Army Humvee, armoured, equipped with machine gun, heading for the patrol along the border to try and catch the Haj sneaking across. Al Qaeda, bringing the new IED remotes, according to Intel.

Crenshaw, up on the 16 MM machine gun, had only been a corporal for a few hours. He had been a sergeant before, but he'd run afoul of a captain, when he'd started emerging as Animus, four days earlier, and somehow, in the time away from this planet he'd lost touch with military protocol. Or perhaps he'd inexplicably let Crenshaw's personal feelings linger in him—the white captain had said something racist; Crenshaw was a black man from Virginia, he was touchy, and Animus had allowed him to react to the "Get your lazy black ass back out there, Sergeant" and he'd told the Captain he was a racist cracker and, soon after, the captain had "found" unprescribed oxycontin in his locker on a "surprise inspection." There was a lot of noise lately about addiction to oxycontin, and other meds, in the infantry, and the Captain had accused him of dealing stolen pharms, and demoted him. "Next time, you go to the stockade!"

The son of a bitch was probably providing the shit to a dealer himself—

What am I doing? Why am I still involved in Crenshaw's concerns? I'm going to fight to the death with Adversary today...

And there was Adversary, in all probability: that assault rifle poking from the low, clay-colored old building fifty yards right of the dusty road. A spurt of fire, and bullets ricocheted from the Humvee.

Crenshaw . . . Animus . . . swung the MG around, grinning to himself, firing back, shouting directions to the driver. But the machine gun stopped firing—before it had reached the end of its belt. He looked down . . . and saw the shells were glowing.

Sixteen-millimeter shells, glowing—about to explode in his face.

He climbed frantically out, shouting a warning to the others, leaping free—not quite too late, this time. The ammunition exploded just behind him, bullets and pieces of the Humvee's roof flying, whirring shrapnel, whining through the air above him as he hit the ground, rolling.

He was instantly up, and sending a mental message to Adversary, his primate body shaking . . .

As he abandoned it. Let the body fall, its brain shattered inwardly in the process, switching off the heart as he went.

He hovered over the corpse in his lightbody as the men who'd survived the explosion in the Humvee crawled confusedly out . . .

He flew upward, before they saw his lightbody, and extended his senses. And found the psychic trail, this time, a moment before it would have dissipated.

Adversary—abandon your host and follow! I've caught them!

Up, up, through a thin, translucent layer of cloud, and another, up to where the sky became indigo with its rarity—and here they caught her.

A female of their kind: her light-patterns inverted. They hovered to either side of her, blocking her escape, and demanded an explanation.

"I have tried to be of help to this species of primates, these many cycles," she said. "War is part of their condition. But you move them to greater and greater heights of confrontation. You'll destroy them, in time. You'll push for the ultimate war."

"Oh, and will we?" Adversary said, in radiant outrage. "And what of it? They are feeble, stupid, evanescent little animals. There are countless such species—most destroy themselves. They themselves wipe out ant colonies. It is much the same."

"Is it?" She emanated gentle disagreement. "They are deeper than you have allowed yourself to see. They have a degree of sentience. I have tried to entangle you with them; so that you feel life as they do. Your self-involvement, your male immaturity pre-

vents it; I've tried other means to discourage you, get you to move on to another world. Now I will go to the Sourceworld Committee, and we will let it decide."

"Why put us through that bureaucratic tedium?" Animus asked, flaring angrily. "The primates are low creatures; they accumulate bits and gimcracks in their dens, like the packrats they try to drive from their attics—that accumulation is the vector of their lives. They scribble a bit, and mark on walls. But they are simple-minded, temporary little things. Lower predators, with little feeling. You are wasting your sympathy on creatures who live so briefly they are gone before you've fully felt your concern!"

"They have enormous evolutionary potential," she said, glimmering patiently. "And they are marvelous animals even now. A fascinating species. We cannot allow you to encourage their extinction when we're only now really beginning to study them."

"You know what she is, Animus?" Adversary said, disgusted. "She's one of these 'animal rights' types!"

"So that's it!" Animus said, with a purple displeasure. "Animal rights! What about my rights? What about Animus Rights? What of the rights of a Conflict Artist to experience Deep Competition? My art, my drama—this is what gives meaning to the lives of these animals, these primates we use, if they have any meaning at all!"

"We'll let the Committee decide . . ."

MOUNTAINS OF WESTERN PAKISTAN, 2023

Sprague was tired of using the killflyers. Remote control killing was unsatisfying—the other soldiers didn't seem to mind. They had been raised on videogames. Sitting in the Army's trailers, controlling the drones with computer interface, was natural to them. The only difference from videogames was that real-life guerrillas died this way.

But Sprague wanted direct confrontation. Face to face. In person.

Confrontation. Yes. With Adversary . . .

He climbed out of the hydrogen-cell Humvee, and set out alone, across the rocky hillside, laser rifle in hand, the exhilaration building in him, as he came to full emergency . . .

There would be no interference from the female called "Anima" this time. The Committee had compromised. He and Adversary could continue, here, if they didn't push certain buttons. This was a valuable wildlife habitat, after all.

And the ultimate primate war could yet come—Animus and Adversary could still take part in that. The new rule was, the primates must be allowed to bring it on themselves.

It would be glorious, when it happened. And he was sure it would. The primates could be relied upon.

There—a glint of sunlight from a scope, up the hillside. It was Adversary, laying for him.

He would drop back, lure him into the valley, and burn away one of Adversary's limbs. But he wouldn't kill him right away. No. He would give him a chance to fight on.

Animus wanted to make this one last. ○

MOVING?

Please send both your old and new address (and include both zip codes) to our subscription department.

Write to us at: Asimov's Science Fiction, Dept. NS, 6 Prowitt St., Norwalk, CT 06855-1220.

Or on our website: www.asimovs.com

ANGIE'S ERRAND

Nick Wolven

After stints in publishing, e-commerce, and secondary education, Nick Wolven currently works for Barnard College Library. In his spare time he takes random night classes and joins rock-n-roll bands. His second story for *Asimov's* takes a look at the fall of Western civilization—and ponders what our greatest loss will be.

At six-thirty in the morning, when the black-throated warblers had begun to sing in the rhododendrons and the light in the windows had gone from gray to yellow, Angie woke the children and assembled them on the screened-in porch. It was a cool day, a breeze was blowing, and the screens, just beginning to separate at the corners from their frames, were slashed with swaths of moisture from a shower of early-morning rain. The children stood in a row on the wet nylon carpeting, fidgeting with excitement even as they yawned and rubbed the sleep-sand from their eyes. Today, according to the old calendar, spotty with mildew, that hung in the kitchen beside the dormant refrigerator, was the second Wednesday of the month—a special day, a critical day, a ritualistic day. Today they were going to town.

"All right," Angie said, bending down to straighten the collar of Emily's jacket. "Remember what I told you last night? When we get to town, Tom's in charge. He's going to pull the wagon, and he's going to do the shopping. Emily, you're going to look after Maya. And Maya, you're going to behave. Right?"

"Yes!" Maya brayed, her fists behind her back. She had learned to speak only six months ago and shot her words out as though blowing a trumpet.

Emily fidgeted as Angie adjusted her jacket. "Where are *you* going?" she asked, for the hundredth time in twenty-four hours.

Angie bit her lip and ran her hands down her sides, smoothing the creases of her sundress. "I told you, Emily. I've got a special errand to run."

"What special errand?" Emily demanded.

"It's a surprise."

"What kind of surprise?"

Angie closed her eyes and pinched the palm of her left hand, as she always did when Emily got on her nerves. Tom came to her rescue.

"Shut up, Emily. Angie knows what she's doing." He nodded at Angie like a miniature soldier, painfully mature in his grimy golf shirt and threadbare jeans.

"That's right," Angie said. "You don't want to spoil it." At the word *spoil* a sob rose in her throat. She swallowed it hastily, releasing Emily's collar. "Come on, let's get the shoes."

They retrieved the shoes from the moldy hall closet: leather boots for Angie, sneakers for Tom and Emily, a special pair of Mom's running shoes stuffed with extra socks for Maya. Down the steps to the flagstone path, down the driveway to the road, along the road to the highway. Angie hung back and studied her family. They were scrawny, bug-bitten, their shoes were already wearing out, but today, invigorated by the trip to town, they looked almost as they had before the Crisis. They had the beautiful haughtiness of healthy children—that conviction of entitlement to a happy life.

By the two big oak trees and the path to the blueberry patch, they passed Mom's grave. Emily wanted to pick Black-Eyed Susans and spread them around the wood marker, but Angie hurried them past. Already, the familiar thoughts assailed her. *You're not like Mom. You don't have what it takes.* And the excuses: *Things are different now. The world is wrecked. Being a mother is a lot harder than it used to be.*

Early that morning before waking the children she had taken a full bath and washed her hair. The sheer waste of it made her stomach knot, but afterward her blonde hair fell in feathery masses that softened the severity of her starved cheeks. Thank god she was only twenty-two. In the master bedroom, Mom's makeup case sat, undisturbed for a year, in the top dresser drawer. When she took it out, the brass clasp released a dense smell of wooden confinement, the aroma of relics and holy artifacts. The tubes and containers, lined in front of the mirror, shone with a prognosticative aspect like beads and polished bones.

A whine intruded on her thoughts. "Angie?"

"Yes, Emily?"

"Why are you all dressed up?" Emily bumped her leg as they walked.

Angie rolled her eyes. "I told you, Emily, it's a surprise. Stop fussing." But there was only one proven method to get Emily to stop fussing. "Why don't we play the Remember Game?"

Emily bounced in circles, nearly falling. "Yes! Yes!"

"How much can you remember about Mom, today?"

"A lot!" Emily began her usual litany, a strange mix of sentimental fabulation and surprisingly acute observations. "She was pretty. And the boys liked her. And she was smart. And she never wore nail polish, and she always had a hangnail." Tom offered periodic corrections. "She did wear nail polish once. For a date." Maya interrupted now and then to assert loudly, "I remember Mom!" A true ritual: everyone had a part to play. It began to seem that Mom had died not a year ago, but decades in the past, and that her death itself had been not an ugly accident but a touching achievement like the completion of a painting. It was wonderful how the gathered details drove her further and further into the distance, as though the catalyzing memories were a propellant fueling her trip to some remote cheerful place.

If it hadn't been for the Remember Game, Angie didn't know how she would have kept the family going. But this time she interrupted the routine.

"Emily, that's great. Awesome. But hey guys, how about something else this time? How much do you remember about Dad?"

Emily abruptly fell silent.

"Come on," Angie coaxed. "You can remember something. It was only two years ago."

"Dad was dumb," Emily said.

"When Mom divorced him," Tom said, "he just went away. He didn't even try to see us."

"But you must remember *something* about him, right?" Angie looked eagerly from one scowling face to another. "Right? Weren't there some nice things about him?"

"No," Emily said.

"Dad was pretty lame," Tom agreed. "All he did was work. He was a pretty crappy cook, too."

"I don't remember Dad," Emily said. "I remember Mom." And then, realizing she had been deceived: "Angie! I want the *surprise*."

"Later," Angie said, struggling to conceal her disappointment. "For the last time, Emily, I'll show you later."

They reached Buckley just before noon. It had never been a big town, and now its core, a plaza of granite bricks, bordered by brick stores and tenements, was surrounded by rings of derelict buildings: crooked two-story houses like witches' cottages shedding ribbons of vinyl siding and surrounded by moats of crushed glass. No bombs had fallen in this woodsy corner of Connecticut; there had been no riots, no pogroms, no purges. But with the prop of civilization removed, life had declined quickly through attrition. Many people had moved to the coast.

Today the plaza was choked with activity. By the old clapboard hotel, men in plaid shirts unloaded big trailer trucks from Torrington. The goods they passed down ended up at wooden stalls and tables, each with its mob of shouting figures and raised fists. Angie lined the children up by the municipal parking lot, where bicycles clustered like massacred insects among horses who urinated torrentially into the tangle of wheels.

"Here's a shopping list. Maya, your job is to ride in the wagon and make sure nothing falls over. Emily, you're responsible for inspecting the supplies. Tom, you're in charge. If anything happens, if anyone makes you uncomfortable, go to Bill's Grocery. I'll meet you there later."

"And bring the surprise?" Emily squealed.

Angie looked over her shoulder at the bustle of the market, the sweating masses of humanity, the brawny men in plaid shirts heaving sacks of produce on their strong shoulders.

"Yes," she said with a wince. "And bring the surprise."

Toskie's had once been a local coffee shop, a quiet place to read in the afternoons or have a conversation over pretentious jazz played live by college kids. Now it was a taphouse that did heavy business on market days in moonshine and fried potatoes. Angie forced her way through knots of men who had managed to stay fat even in these lean times, holding her breath against body odor and boozy exhalations, wriggling to escape sly fingers and damp palms. She pressed her stomach to the aluminum counter behind which the barmaid hustled and panted. "Is Derrick in?"

"To the back!"

In the kitchen a battery-powered radio shrieked old love songs over the tuneless carillon of ringing crockery. Derrick stood with his arms in soapy water, his jet hair slick with steam. Angie's stomach clenched painfully, but there was no turning back: he had already seen her.

"Angela!" Derrick always used her full name. It was one reason she had turned down his advances so many times in the past—a petty reason, of course, but things had been different in high school. The habit, along with his tucked-in button shirts, his loafers, his slicked-back hair, his membership in the Future Business Leaders of America club, had been fatal symptoms of uptightness. How could anyone have fun with a boyfriend so polite? Angie grimaced recalling the way she had thought back then. She liked to imagine she had always been the same, even while the world went to pieces around her.

"You in town for the market? Where are the kids?" Derrick greeted her in his customary way, gripping her arm gently at the elbow—a gesture both unpleasantly intimate and unnervingly devoid of affection. "I bet Maya's been picking up a lot of new words. How's Tom doing?"

She lifted her eyes to his square, handsome face. "The kids are fine. They're doing some shopping by themselves today."

"That's good. Teach them some independence. That's important, these days."

Independence. It was one of Derrick's watchwords. In the old days it had meant Republican values, small business and welfare reform and meritocracy. Now it meant skinning deer at the age of eight and salvaging cars.

She ran her fingers through her hair, already limp from the steam. "How've you been, Derry? Still thinking of rebuilding the school?"

"No, that plan's on hold. It was moving along for a while. I had a majority of the council behind it, but a couple of things came up . . ." He ran on about his jobs, his plans, while she studied his tall body, slim from cutting wood, his confident eyes, his broad shoulders, carefully adding these observations to a vision she had formed over weeks within herself. Only when he said, "Well, it's great to see you, but I better get back to work," did she muster the strength to quaver, "Derry?"

He had already turned away, but at the urgency in her voice he faced her squarely. They looked at each other awkwardly through the steam. She pressed on, dismayed to find that her teeth were chattering. "Derry, do you ever think about high school?"

"Not too much. No time for it."

"But you remember what it was like?"

"Sure. At least, I suppose I do."

"You remember Katie's Fourth of July barbecue? Junior year?" She pushed the words out so quickly she ran low on breath. "That walk we took afterward?"

He looked away. The steamy air swirled between them, misting his features. Memories coalesced out of the vapor like visions in a crystal ball: throngs of young faces drunk on Smirnoff Ice, bottles and crushed ice in a blue recycling bin, paper lanterns strung on a clothesline, vinyl-sided bi-levels ringing a cul-de-sac like the megaliths of a henge. She had gotten drunk for the first time that night, and time had grown wonderfully liquid. All the cramped insecurities of her past rinsed away, happiness washed back upon her from a glorious future, and Derrick was standing next to her under the Chinese lanterns talking about Venezuela and the cost of oil. He had always been politically aware.

Then the conversation changed, Venezuela dropped away, and he was talking about her hair, her smile, the bracelet she had inherited from her grandmother. He touched her shoulder and they left the party and walked around the cul-de-sac while he filled the night with words. Under a streetlight she put a stop to his talk, pressed herself against him and turned up her face. She could tell he was disturbed by her boldness but she needed to stop the flow of words; there were too many words between them already, words complicated things . . . The kiss lasted a long time and its energy drew his fingers into her hair, so that afterward she remembered not the feel of his lips but sweet shivers that arced like the arms of a tiara across her scalp.

She heard herself whispering about private places, a bedroom in Katie's house, locking the door.

Then he was pushing her back. And the torrent of words had started up again, fluent, practiced, horribly reasonable. Derrick was disappointed in her. He knew what kind of a girl she was, and she was a marrying kind of girl. He had picked her out a long time ago; he knew just how things would be. The words arranged themselves around her like bricks: the prom, college, two children—a cell of words from which she had to escape at all costs.

Steam curled between them, obscuring a past that, in this world, was as irrelevant as a fantasy. Derrick turned from her and sunk his arms to the elbows in soapy water.

"I remember that night. Sure."

"Do you ever still think about that?" She stepped forward. "All that stuff we talked about?"

He nodded and said through tight lips, "You weren't ready for a relationship." The words had a dead sound, as though he had repeated them to himself so many times that the meaning had worn off like paint.

"I wasn't. Then. I mean, we were in high school." She took a deep breath. "Do you ever still feel those things? Like you told me?"

Even before he faced her she saw pain in his face, at the corner of his eye and in the tightening of his jaw. He took hold of her shoulders without drying his hands, and the warm water soaked through her dress and trickled down the backs of her arms. With relief and terror she let herself fall into the vision she had crafted, that delicate potentiality in her soul. Derrick was kind and even-tempered. He knew how to fish and hunt. Above all, he was fit, dependable. He could teach Tom how to hunt and maintain a rifle. He would be patient with Emily. She dared, finally, to picture the image that made her vision complete: his strong, safe body holding Maya in its arms. Relief intensified to a pain that stung her eyes.

"I'm getting married," he said.

If he were not holding her, she would have fallen. His fingers bit her arms.

"My dad set it up." The sentences fell on her as methodically as hammer blows. "She's a good girl. She's from Torrington, her family runs the trucking station there. They're nice people. We're making a deal with them, to get supplies up from the harbor." With soft consideration that made her want to beat his chest, strike his face, he explained in a rush, "Those kinds of connections could be really good for the town. We could make this place a trading hub, Angela. It's a . . . a smart match."

Again the words built up around her, hard and reasonable as a fortress. She shoved him thoughtlessly, twisting like a fox in a trap.

"Angela!"

The sound of her name died on the air behind her as she ran from the kitchen, three syllables over-articulated and alien, as automatic and empty as a word in a prayer.

Angie sat under a birch tree on a hill outside town, holding her bottle of soda tightly to keep her hands from shaking. From here, seen through stalks of milkweed and milling gnats, the bustle of the market, the gray bulk of the hospital, the strand of gray smoke rising from the chimney of Toskie's taphouse, were small tokens of humanity in a field of ruins and leaves. Their smallness made them seem invulnerable, somehow, remote and safe from the world like stars.

She gripped her soda bottle tightly, consoled by its smooth artificiality, the optimistic label with its manicured design. Cases of the stuff came from warehouses scattered around the state. The soda was inevitably flat but had become one of life's chief luxuries, not least through its association with the giddy consumption of the past. Derrick was right, trade was vital, and for trade you needed strong alliances among communities. His marriage had been a good choice.

But when she sipped her soda those practical reflections dissolved. The sweet taste was like a distillation of another world, her mother's world. What would her mother say about Derrick's choice? About the world that had forced his choice? At thirty-six, Angie's mother had been an active, outdoorsy woman bouncing around the country as a programmer and consultant, wandering in and out of marriages as freely as she changed jobs. When a job bored her, she quit and got a new one. When a relationship went sour, she found a new lover. Even after the Crisis, she had maintained her cavalier attitude. It was an adventure, like a power outage on a grand scale, and it brought out her best quality. Not pragmatism, not dynamism, as the people who worked with and married her might have guessed, but an uncompromising, almost

ruthless confidence. She had retained the glory of a child, a conviction that the world owed her joy. Her chief emotion, consequently, had been a kind of exultant rage. Rage at the husbands who disappointed her, rage at the jobs that bored her, rage at the purchases and vacations and—yes—the children that failed to instantiate her primal dreams. Rage at the Crisis and, finally, at the rotting porch steps that gave way beneath her and the infected wounds that ended her life.

She would never have understood Angie's errand. Or rather, she would have embraced the errand, but not the motive behind it. She had never sensed the menace that kept Angie awake every night, the nameless danger that brooded in the wood around the house. At all times, while chopping wood or cooking or doing wash, Angie had an eye on that forest, spare New England forest laced with old farmers' walls that rustled with the moltings of paper birches and hung crooked oak branches over the wire fence ringing the yard. Something terrible would come from that forest one day, as surely as winter came over the mountain in December; she knew it. It would come for Maya and Emily, perhaps for Tom, and she would be powerless to turn it back.

She took the makeup case out of her shoulder bag and checked her hair in the mirrored lid of a rouge container. She would never be as beautiful as her mother. She lacked the requisite self-absorption, the ferocity and lust to which self-absorption gave rise. At least she had youth on her side. She snapped shut the case, capped her soda, dispersed the gnats with a wave, and marched down the hill through the milkweed to town.

The men in plaid shirts were now loading the tractor trailers, heaving boxes up from the vendors' carts. As they worked they sang foul-mouthed chants in which a gathered crowd sometimes joined. A crowd mostly of women, Angie noticed with unease. She took up a position at the periphery and studied the rhythmic swinging and flexing of the young male limbs, the sinews that fluttered in the forearms like silent arpeggios, the sweat that shone in the soft, cupped spaces between cheekbones and eyes. Their hands were so sure, their faces so confident. But something uncertain and dangerous manifested in the grinding of their jaws, in the severe shadows beneath the flexed biceps of those who had rolled up their sleeves. Not a threat, precisely, but an unrealized force, as when an animal pauses, twitching, between retreat and attack.

A shiver ran down her spine, and it was only when it had passed that she realized consciously what her body had already detected. One of the men was watching her. He looked to be the youngest, with a thick neck and hair so black and slick it seemed painted on. He said a word to one of his friends and hopped from the truck. Before she knew what was happening, he stood facing her.

"Hey there. You looking to buy something?"

"What? No." She still felt as if she were watching him from a distance, though he stood closer to her than was normal or polite, smiling and wiping his forehead with his sleeve. He was not as tall as he had seemed standing on the trailer, but his neck and shoulders were monstrous with muscle. He nodded over his shoulder at the crowd.

"Only the wholesale guys are supposed to buy direct from us. But sometimes we make exceptions. If we take a liking to someone."

When his eye ran down her she felt as though her summer dress had disappeared. Speech had become a sticky substance, difficult to shape. "And have you taken a liking to me?"

He grinned, showing even, nicotine-stained teeth. "You want to take a walk? Hold on, let me tell the boys." He put a hand on her back as he turned and waved at his friends.

The man—his name was Rick—talked steadily as they walked through town, so that once she had told him her name she had no more need or opportunity to speak.

It always seemed to be this way with men: they did all their talking right off the bat, and the more time you spent with them the less they had to say.

Rick was originally from Hartford. He had run track there, before the Crisis, but now his knees were bad from too much heavy lifting. (As he said this, he swung his arms so that the muscles rolled beneath his shirt.) He liked working on the trucks. You got to see a lot of people, and it felt good, with everything going to hell, to be on the road, nomadic, in the condition to which all people would eventually decline. Rick thought it was only a matter of time until civilization collapsed entirely. He made the declaration with cheerful arrogance, as though knowing they were all doomed made him more powerful than the average person.

He steered her through the throng with light taps on her back. His presence served as a kind of shield. The groping hands that usually harassed her were absent, and she felt a sense of security faintly magical in its consistency. *He seems like a good person*, she told herself repeatedly, *he's young, he's strong*. But when he smiled at her, her face refused to smile back.

They passed out of the market and into a quiet area of town where each polygon of the cracked sidewalk had its own tiny fence of weeds. Vestiges of glass in the frames of townhouse windows glistened in the afternoon light like unshed tears. Rick's hand tensed against her back. "Well, this is an unfriendly looking area." He smiled as he said it—the unfriendliness was clearly of no consequence to him; he was only worried on her behalf. "You know a place where we could sit down and talk? Out of the open?"

"There's Toskie's."

"That nasty bar? We won't even get a seat. Look, here's an old house. I bet this is all right."

He led her through a chain fence overgrown with rose bushes, across an overgrown lawn. With a kind of self-conscious nonchalance he forced open a broken window. She followed his lead inertly, instinctually sure that if she did not give in to his will at every point, she must abandon the affair entirely. As he helped her through the window, Rick slashed his hand on a thorn and cursed dramatically. It was an odd moment, faintly portentous—it seemed to her he had cut his hand on purpose.

In a dusty livingroom they sat on a swaybacked sofa among scattered items too heavy or useless to have attracted looters: a moldering hooked rug, a toy Hess truck, a flood of curling photographs spilled across the floor.

"God, it must get depressing around here." Rick spread his arms on the back of the couch. "Up in the boonies, with everyone dying off. You have anyone to talk to?"

She knew it was too soon to mention the children. An instinct she was ashamed to discover in herself told her how these sorts of encounters proceeded. "No. No one."

"That's terrible. I mean that's just wrong. What do you do?"

"I get by."

"You deserve more than that."

He turned to face her, putting his hand to the couch, and winced—the cut from the thornbush. She reached instinctively for his hand. The moment she touched him, he drew her smoothly into his arms. The pungency of his sweat invaded her, a terrible, painful odor that seemed to have lain flat against his body until that moment, waiting to ambush her like a set of quills.

"Angie . . . poor Angie." His hand petted her hair. He did not seem to mind the wound in his palm, now. He took her head between his palms and kissed her. The meaty roughness of his lips made her turn her head away, and she found herself gazing past his sweaty cheek out the window.

"What? What?" She gasped and leapt away from him, her feet slipping on the carpet of torn photographs. Disoriented, she looked down with a strange fixation at the

images that slid under her feet—a sagging birthday cake, cypresses in Italy, a dog held still for the camera by a knot of children's arms. Her gaze went back to the window and she released a long moan of anger and despair.

"Angie, what's up?" Rick hopped off the couch, simultaneously reaching for her and turning to follow her gaze. Two men in plaid shirts—his friends from the truck—were crossing the street.

"Oh, you dumb assholes . . ." Rick put a hand on her shoulder. "Hey, I'm sorry. They must have followed us here."

"You waved to them," she said breathlessly. "You signaled them."

"Now, why would you think that?"

"Yo, Rick!" one of the men called. "You warming her up!"

Rick's face sagged. "Come on," he pleaded to Angie, taking her hand. "You've been all alone, here, all this time . . . It'll be fun."

She scanned the room frantically, searching for weapons. But it was hopeless—three strong men! A cold part of her brain strategized: if she fought, it would only make them angry. If she surrendered, they might be gentle, might even reward her somehow. Rick seemed so hopeful, so pathetic. And what choice did she have?

But one thought flashed in her mind brighter than all others. Rape was incidental, pain was incidental. But to be handicapped for months . . . to be ill, possibly bedridden . . . to require the attentions of a doctor, to compensate the doctor . . . to have, finally, another mouth to feed, another ego to placate, another voice that would scream for her in the night . . . a dread stronger and more calculating than the frenzied terror that anticipates pain—dread, it seemed, of helplessness itself—quickened her nerves.

Rick advanced slowly, corralling her into a corner. Her face heated with rage, but not rage toward Rick: rage toward the unfairness that had set him there, the injustice of his calm approach, the single bright possibility that illuminated her mind with foreboding. When he seized her wrist, the rage erupted as a scream.

"Hey, hey." He spoke petulantly as though to a child. "Stop that."

His friends had climbed through the window. "Yo, shut her up, man!"

"I'm trying!" Rick ran his fingers down her cheek. "Come on, Angie. Jesus. It'll be all right. Why are you doing this?" She jerked away, screaming again, not in panic but with calm steady power, and scooped the toy truck from the floor. The weight of it in her hand thrilled her with the knightly glory of defying an inevitable fate. She lusted for the sight of Rick's face battered and flayed—not for the violence of the image but for the wounded disbelief that would soften his eyes, the childish incredulity he would evince when an event deemed impossible came to pass.

"Angie," he begged, raising a big sad fist. "Don't. Please."

She drew back her arm, prepared to swing the truck, but a voice—a male voice—called from the street.

"Everything all right in there?"

Rick's companions scurried away, rapid and silent as scavengers chased from a kill. She heard their boots pounding on the wood steps of the back porch, the jangle of a chain fence shaken by their vaulting bodies. Rick lingered, gazing at her with the precise expression of hurt amazement she had hoped to see. He took a step forward, his extended hand cupped like a beggar's. She said nothing, offered him nothing. In a moment, he too was gone.

She sank onto the couch as the voice called again. "Hello? Hello?" A face appeared in the window, old, old, flaccid, puffy about the mouth as though with held breath—Bill Carver, the grocer. She began to cry.

"Oh, hey," Bill Carver said, and essayed the difficult chore of climbing into the room. Even as she wept, she went to the window and helped him. His knobby fingers

curled stiffly and uncertainly, like an infant's, in her palm. She tugged with both hands, tears trickling unchecked down her cheeks. "Oh, what am I doing," Bill Carver sighed, "I'm a fool." He disappeared around the house, and a door banged. Presently he entered the room.

Poor bow-legged, pot-bellied, puff-cheeked old Bill Carver. The sight of him had always aroused in her a pity bordering on distaste. But he had the *voice*, the *male voice*—that absurd primitive charm for setting cowards to flight.

"What's happening here?" he said, and she leaned against him, sobbing, while his gnarled hand patted her back. "Saw some trucker boys come this way," he explained. "Couple guys promised me a deal and I thought they were skipping out. They try to hurt you? Is that it?" Her nod set him off on a chivalrous tirade: more manly words piling around her, stern and enclosing. While he ranted he stroked her back. She noticed that his hand was shaking. He was trying to console them both with his righteous words, as though righteousness were equivalent to strength. He didn't realize that her sobs were not of fear, but of frustration.

"Stop!" she cried, "I can't—just stop, stop!" She sank to the couch, pulling him with her, and at last it was her turn to speak. Into Bill Carver's stunned silence she poured a litany composed over months of introspection, an account of loose teeth and torn clothes and snot, of rain spraying through broken windows, of Tom telling her the head had come off the ax again, and why couldn't he fix it himself, for once?—of Emily's fits and Maya's fussy stomach, of the thoughts that could never be spoken and that consequently overflowed, filling her bedroom at home with doubt and rage like a choking miasma, with anxiety so omnipresent that she often spoke to herself without realizing it. At last she came to a question that seemed to sum up all the injustices. How had Mom *done* it, it had always been so *easy* for her, daycare and therapy and support groups and a new man every year—and so confident, always confident, that it would always be like this, that no evil thing waited in the forest to advance when you let your guard down and take the children away . . .

"What," Bill said vaguely, "what's that now? Something coming? For the children?"

His baffled, scratchy voice recalled her to the present. She fell silent, realizing he could not see them as she could, those attendant threatening figures lurking on the horizon. And yet in her mind they appeared so clearly, prowling the distance like trolls, looting, raping, torturing stray dogs and cats: hunched, strong figures that grouped under defunct streetlights in abandoned towns, smoking and drinking, or skipped through the forest with wild cries, calling each other mocking names. A pack of teenage boys, shirtless, lupine in the moonlight, had run across the lawn one night, laughing over some savage game, and each day when the sun went down she pictured those boys returning to storm the house. In fact she pictured them, or creatures like them, propagating through the world like vermin, gathering force in the wrecked remains of the country like a wildfire in a forest that had for too long been protected.

"I thought I could find a good one." The words leaked from her, unwilling. But they were out now, teasing Bill Carver's curiosity. He questioned her and she tried to explain, divulging scattered reflections that aggregated haphazardly, like papier mâché, around a vision she had labored to form. A vision of the one thing that seemed to promise her a happy future: a reliable male silhouette that might loom in the doorway, a deep voice that might boom across the lawn, a sort of scarecrow that could be propped at need on the porch to keep marauders at bay.

"I see," Bill Carver said slowly. "Yes, I see. Yes, it does get lonely."

Clearly he did *not* see, because loneliness was not the problem. He would never see, and yet, as she studied him with eyes sore from tears, a sort of understanding developed.

"It's not for me," Angie said. "It's for the kids."

He nodded and said again, "Yes. It does get lonely, doesn't it?"

She forced thoughts upon herself, assembling them in her mind as she had once assembled geometry proofs in high school. Bill's wife had died ages ago, well before the Crisis. He had no children. He was getting old, he wasn't strong, he was missing several teeth and had a wart beside his left eye. But he owned a store and had connections to the trade routes, and he wasn't so old as to be a burden on others. Above all, he was trustworthy.

"If you ever need anything . . ." he was saying, "Some rare goods . . . maybe a place to stay while you're in town . . ."

As though examining a fruit before picking it, she reached out and touched the lobe of his ear, lifting it slightly on her finger. His skin, in this small place, was soft and smooth as a child's.

"Oh," Bill said feebly. "Oh, Angie . . ." At the small provocation of her touch his deep voice lost all its power and authority. His clumsy fingers, lifted to her shoulder, burrowed into the folds of her dress. With horror she saw tears on his cheeks. The nausea that rose in her at the sight lifted into her consciousness a surmise more appalling than any that had occurred to her that day: it was as though half the world stared at her through those weak, weeping eyes.

"Angie," Bill stammered, "You know, I could be good to you. If you'd let me. You'd never have to worry. Why, I'd . . . When I knew your mother, years ago, I used to see you coming to the store . . . but I never thought, never in a million years . . . oh, if you'd only let me, you know you wouldn't even have to . . ." He swallowed the end of the sentence and said in its place, "You have no idea what it would mean to me."

When she drew away, he shuddered as though she had pulled a vital organ from his body. "Angie!" he cried at her retreat, not in protest or appeal but as a simple expression of pain. She stood and gazed down at him impassively. None of the strange male charm remained in his voice; it was thin and strained as an infant's. His wattering eyes mooned up at her like a dog's. How had she thought she could wake every morning to those insatiable eyes, to their pitiful gratitude?

Bill soon recollected himself. His gnarled hands fell to his potbelly and nursed each other there with clumsy caresses. "What am I saying? I'm sorry. But if you do need anything, please, Angie, anything at all . . ."

She forced herself to smile, to offer her hand, to support him as they passed through the house and down the sagging porch steps.

Angie put the children to bed early that night. She had given them lollipops by way of the promised "surprise." Only Tom had seemed disappointed.

With Maya tucked in, with Tom reading by candlelight, with the doors of the bedrooms shut, Angie tiptoed into Mom's room, opened the nightstand, and took out the steel box that contained the gun. It was a small weapon, intended for home defense. There were no bullets. She carried it to the screened porch and sat in the dark in her wicker chair, sinking slowly into the drowsy semi-alertness that served her these days as sleep. Her thoughts recurred with a regularity almost relaxing over familiar concerns as her eyes monitored the shaggy border of the forest.

Shame: that was what she felt. Shame, above all. What would her mother say? Had Angie actually considered moving the children into Bill Carver's store, linking herself to that body lapsing day by day into a second infancy? Yet even now a part of her regretted her decision, the promptness with which she had thrown away the blessing of that charmed deep voice. And this of course was what her mother would have despised most: any hint of regret.

But it went beyond that. Her shame was not private; it was part of a collective ex-

perience. A historical moment had passed unrecognized. In retrospect it was frightening how quickly the change had come, like a drawn bow reverting to form. It was only when she reflected in hindsight on the years of the Crisis that she recognized contingent steps in a great development. Overnight, it seemed, the streets had grown raucous with violent men. They had abandoned themselves to savagery almost before the bombs had done their work, as though the war were merely an excuse, a license to indulge latent primitivism. Almost as quickly, every woman Angie knew had seized one man for her own, latching herself to a set of broad shoulders, a deep voice, as hastily and with as much instinctive pragmatism as she might have tied a house key to her wrist. As a girl Angie had been disgusted, like her mother, by the weak desperation of these women, by what she regarded as their acts of cowardice. It was only later that she came to see their desperation as a greater betrayal than weakness or cowardice—more sympathetic, perhaps, but harder to forgive.

Was this all it amounted to, then—her mother's world? A short golden age: one, perhaps two generations, of a beautiful faith in progress? Or perhaps it had only been a game that people played for a time, and the illusion of progress was merely a myth that appeared in retrospect. Perhaps that was true of all golden ages.

A scene recurred to her from shortly after the Crisis. Dad had left, Maya was not yet born. They still had the car, and Angie's mother had taken her and Tom and Emily on a trip to Hartford to see if a cousin was still alive. The car broke down on a back road, and Angie's mother instinctively reached into her coat pocket and took out her defunct cell phone. After staring a moment at the dead screen, she laughed suddenly and hurled the phone into the forest. It was a characteristic and lovely gesture in its giddy reproach of the past. It lodged in Angie's mind as the moment the world truly changed. It was as though the whole family had suddenly been set free of an unrealistic assumption. The particular detail that seized her imagination every night and made her sick with regret was the tone of her mother's laugh: so bold, so unrestrained, like providence reduced to a sound.

A noise drew her attention to the forest. Her hand crept over the gun in her lap. Even without bullets, it had its use—as a bright, familiar emblem, like a small hard piece of the law.

Another sound, a rustle. Something was moving at the edge of the yard. She rose and went to the screen. Her eye picked out a dark shape browsing beneath the trees.

A bear? They had multiplied since the Crisis by feeding on garbage—black bears, easily startled; a shout usually frightened them away. Clouds shifted and the moonlight shone brighter. As the scene gained clarity her mind grew clear as well, so that when she recognized the form at the edge of the yard she was calm, strengthened by a morbid conviction. An echo of her mother's laugh rolled through her mind, releasing her from illusion and refining her spirit into a will to violence. In the cold access of moonlight, she admitted finally that the Crisis, with all its bombast and overtones of apocalypse, had chiefly been a means to an end. She understood now the freedom it had granted her, a soldier's freedom to hate with abandon. She found herself thinking, *You've done it at last.*

The darkness of the forest birthed a shadow that loped across the lawn. She tightened her fingers on the empty gun, not in fear or anticipation but merely in a kind of recognition. She was surprised to find herself, at this realization of her nightmares, filled with contentment, a patience dangerous as the practical gaze of a wolf.

The shadow paused. She lifted her weapon. The gun caught the moonlight so that her movement cast a flash of silver on the screen, a fleeting spark like something small, precious, and unnecessary cast away. She gave her mind up to an irrational, indomitable confidence. Her weapon might be moribund, but the hand that held it was a woman's, calm and terrible. ○

THE WORLD'S ENDING AGAIN IN 2012

Oh dear, the world's ending again.
 Mayans this time. Their calendar
 runs out in 2012, after which,
 in the timeless void, it hardly matters
 whether we are showered with stones or
 eaten by jaguars; the end is the end
 and the rest is silence,
 except that the Amazing Randi once compiled
 a helpful list of such prophecies to suggest
 that the world ends in most years, or at least
 often enough, dooms striking our troubled planet
 with the regularity of waves lapping against a rock.
 AD 64 and 1000 hardly need mention.

As ever, Nostradamus stirs in his musty vault,
 adaptable to any purpose; and we may gloss over
 pyramids and pharonic dooms, or the latest revisions
 of Mother Shipton, and only shrug that Jeane Dixon
 promised a cometary collision in the 1980s
 and failed to deliver.

I have my own favorites, among them
 William Miller, who got to do it three times,
 twice in 1843 and once again in 1844, leading his flock
 to sell their goods (Why? What would they do with the
 money?), put on ascension robes, and wait
 for the City of God, like a freight elevator,
 to descend and carry them to glory.

And I have to admire the chutzpah
 of the Korean cult leader who invested the cash
 in certificates that didn't come due
 until after the appointed date.

Now that's what I call optimism.
 So, if the world's going to end in 2012,
 I think we can pull through.
 Let's talk about this again in 2013.

—Darrell Schweitzer



For more than thirty years, Jim Aikin has written about music technology for *Keyboard* and other leading music magazines. He is the author of *Power Tools for Synthesizer Programming*, as well as two novels—*Walk the Moons Road* and *The Wall at the Edge of the World*. His short fiction has appeared in *Asimov's*, *F&SF*, and elsewhere. For more information visit his personal website, www.musicwords.net and his blog at midiguru.wordpress.com. In his first story for us in twenty-three years, Jim takes a haunting look at some mysterious characters who may soon be . . .

LEAVING THE STATION

Jim Aikin

"The past isn't dead. It isn't even past."

—William Faulkner

By the time she turned forty, Joan had mostly managed to forget that when she was young she had seen ghosts. She had thrust the ectoplasmic intrusions that roiled her childhood into a big old trunk in the back of her brain, had locked the trunk and thrown away the key.

But then Uncle Frederick died and left her the antique store.

She had never been close to Uncle Frederick, though they lived less than twenty miles apart. He was her mother's brother, and was too wedded in spirit to the inexplicable and pointless enthusiasms that had infected and ultimately shredded her parents' lives. Her parents had grown up in the sixties. Mom read Tarot cards, played the flute while sitting cross-legged on the floor, and changed her name twice because her guru told her to. Daddy made origami sculpture, fetishistically and inexpertly, and sold it with indifferent success at an endless string of grimy street fairs. Crushed and mutilated birds and frogs made of folded yellow and purple paper littered the floor of Joan's childhood.

She far preferred Uncle Ray, her father's brother. Uncle Ray had inherited the same obsessive gene, but turned it to better use: He taught high-school math. At fifteen, weary of moving from one cramped, noisy apartment to another, weary of her parents' penniless, stoned friends and their droning reminiscences of long-ago Grateful Dead concerts, Joan stormily divorced her parents and stomped off to live with Uncle Ray and his brood, where she cheerfully slept on a futon on the living room floor until she went away to college. She learned trig and then calculus sitting at Uncle Ray's kitchen table, ignoring Aunt Mary's diffident, though unceasing, attempts to interest her in cooking. At college she majored in math. She became a computer programmer.

Somewhere along in there, the ghosts tapered off. Maybe they sensed that she re-

ally didn't want them hanging around, or maybe something had changed in her that made her less receptive.

When she was little, she hadn't known they were ghosts. They didn't shriek or walk through walls, though they did appear and disappear with alarming insouciance. Only gradually did it dawn on her that she was seeing people nobody else could see. The woman with the burned hand, for instance, or the old man mowing his lawn day after day, and the lawn standing up just as long behind the mower as in front of it. Sometimes they spoke to her, but not in the normal way—"Hello, little girl." It was as if she had turned on the TV in the middle of a show and was being treated to random scraps of dialogue. "I killed my brother," a young black man said to her. That scared her, but he didn't look so much scary as just sad and lost. She knew he was a ghost because she always saw him at the same street corner, and he always said the same thing. Sometimes the ghosts would ask her questions, and if she replied they would look puzzled, as if that wasn't what they were expecting (hoping?) to hear. Mostly, though, they just ignored her and went about their business, whatever that was.

When Mom found out about the ghosts, they became a Big Deal. At the age of eight, Joan was expected to lead séances. But she couldn't summon ghosts; they came and went according to their own whims, and not very often at that. The séances were a flop. Her mother seemed to take this as a personal affront, as if either Joan or the ghosts (or both, conspiring) were hoarding some Ultimate Truth rather than share it with her.

The séances stopped, but her mother never stopped pestering her to know what the ghosts had said. Every spectral utterance, no matter how banal, was poked and prodded in an effort to force it to reveal its veiled cosmic import. After a while Joan started making stuff up and claiming a ghost had said it. When her mother caught on (and that didn't happen for several years), it turned into a kind of game. "Did they really say that? Really? Or is it something you made up? Joanie, tell me the truth, now."

Maybe the ghosts had gone away because she started lying about them. That was a thought. Only now they were back, and the antique store was to blame. It attracted them.

The store was called Station House Antiques. It was housed in an old building that had once, when the town was much smaller, been an actual functioning train station. The train line had been moved down by the bay before World War II, and the rails torn out. New streets had been laid down when the freeway came, leaving the former station perched in isolated and rapidly fading nineteenth-century small-town civic architecture grandeur on an awkwardly shaped lot with inadequate parking.

The main room was large, high-ceilinged, and crammed with tables, shelves, and display cases. Every available surface, not omitting the walls, was overflowing with merchandise. Faded brown photos in plain frames, a butter churn, cavalry swords, a dressmaker's dummy, a model merry-go-round made of painted tin. Hundreds of pieces of china and glass, some chipped and some pristine, no two alike. Tattered magazines, silver pepper mills, stuffed birds perched in an ornate cage, four or five assorted umbrella stands. The light from the street acquired a patina of dust as it passed through the broad front window, and quickly lost itself among the crooked aisles. Smaller side rooms were packed with dark, heavy furniture and used books.

As a young adult, pursuing her lackluster career in Silicon Valley, Joan was only hazily aware that Uncle Frederick had ventured into the antiques business. Before that he had owned a bicycle shop, which went broke. She had visited the antique store exactly once, and found the teetering stacks of tarnished junk depressing and a little creepy. Having gone to some lengths to unencumber herself of the baggage of the past, she couldn't fathom why anyone would want to surround themselves with old stuff. She hadn't seen any ghosts on that visit, but looking back on it, her urge to

get out of the place quickly might have been a clue that they were hovering nearby, dreaming about her.

At thirty, goaded by long-submerged urges, she had swum up out of the depths of database code maintenance long enough to get married, to an individual she now referred to exclusively as "that asshole." Six years later she learned, because he didn't try very hard to hide it, that that asshole was sleeping with his admin. He had also caught herpes from the admin, and bestowed it on Joan as a little amorous gift.

After he trudged off, padded so thickly in injured dignity that her screams of rage had no chance to penetrate, she went through the apartment with furious energy, seizing and removing any item that was even faintly stained by its former nearness to that asshole. She hauled down to the dumpster the pictures he had bought for the walls, the plates he had eaten off of, even the tins of shoe polish he had left under the bathroom sink. She was left with an almost bare apartment. The wind blew through uncurtained windows, and there was no past to weigh her down. Except for the herpes, of course.

And then the company she worked for got acquisitioned and downsized, and she got laid off. The severance package dwindled, and all the programming jobs were moving offshore. But within days after she gave notice on the apartment and started looking around in a gloomy, half-hearted way for a roommate situation, Uncle Frederick providentially died.

Like her parents, and like Uncle Ray and Aunt Mary, Uncle Frederick had lived his life from month to month, never managing to scrape together more than a few dollars in savings. But he had owned the antique store outright, and he left it to her.

Her first thought was to sell the store. But until she found another job, a steady source of income, however meager, would be better than a big lump of money that she would eventually burn through. Anyway, she had mastered the intricacies of Fortran, Pascal, C++, Java, and Python. How hard could it be to learn antiques?

There was a room in the back of the store—Uncle Frederick had used it as an office, as had the station master in years gone by—that had a functioning bathroom. She cleared out the back room, set up housekeeping, and went into business as a full-time purveyor of fine antiquities and collectible memorabilia. She pored through antiques trade journals, scoured the websites where aficionados aired their passions and prejudices, staked out auctions and estate sales. Business was never good, but some months she actually had enough extra in the cash drawer to treat herself to a play in San Francisco or a weekend at Tahoe.

The ghosts didn't arrive at the store all in a rush. Maybe it took them a while to notice where she was hanging out, or maybe they were there all along but it was a while before she started to see them.

The first whisper that something might be awry came from the ungovernable inventory. Uncle Frederick had never kept a written inventory that she could find. Either he had stored the cost and likely value of ten thousand things in his head, or he was just a poor excuse for a businessman. Joan suspected the latter. Until she knew what she had in stock, acquiring more stuff would only embroil her in costly mistakes. So she did what any computer professional would do: She set up a database on her laptop.

But a task that had at first seemed merely monumental soon slipped through her fingers entirely.

Not simply because of the size of the store—there were five downstairs rooms, plus the upstairs gallery—or the difficulty in categorizing nearly unique items. Maybe, she told herself, it was because it was so easy to get sleepy on a warm afternoon and miss something. She would list all of the items on the long narrow table by the west wall, filling in the fields for Type, Condition, Description, Price, and Table/Case/Shelf, working in what she was sure was a meticulous and methodical manner, but a few

days later her eye would be caught by some striking piece on the table, and she would think, "Now, I don't remember that. Is that in the inventory?" And when she looked in the database, sure enough, there was no fluted porcelain pitcher with pink flowers and twining vines listed on that table. Nor anywhere else in the store, if the database was to be believed. Yet there it was.

How many ukuleles were hanging on the north wall of the east room? She didn't exactly know. The database said six, but when she went to look, there might be seven. Or only six, but their descriptions might not, if you got a flashlight and peered between the strings to inspect the labels on the inside, quite match what was entered in the computer.

She could see at least four possible explanations. First, there might be something wrong with the database software. Being a computer professional, she investigated that possibility methodically, and ruled it out. Second, someone might be altering the database when she wasn't around. But she was alone in the store most of the time, the laptop wasn't even connected to the internet most of the time, and the database was password-protected, so no hacker could possibly be fiddling with the data—not that anyone would want to. Third, there might be something seriously awry with her inventory methods. But Joan was not a scatterbrain. Fourth, things might be somehow magically appearing and disappearing in the store when she wasn't looking. And that was obviously impossible too.

If it had just been things disappearing, that would be due to shoplifters or burglars. But why would a burglar break in at night (without tripping the alarm) and put an extra Victorian brooch in the jewelry case?

Even before Joan saw the girl, she had started to think maybe the store was infested with ghosts. It was as if the past was not quite dead and buried here, as if history slept fitfully in its bed and tumbled the blankets into knots.

She came upon the girl in the upstairs gallery, just at sunset. The gallery was a narrow floor space above the main room from which you could look down over a railing and see a labyrinth of tables, shelves, and glass-topped counters that looked, depending on the light, not unlike an aerial photo of the ruins of Pompeii. A rainstorm had been pounding all afternoon, and it occurred to Joan (tardily) that she ought to make sure the upstairs windows were securely closed. She hadn't turned on the overheads, so the gallery was dim, and rain thrummed on the roof.

The girl was no more than ten years old. Her dress was long and faded, and she was wearing, of all things, a bonnet. She looked at Joan beseechingly. "Can you help, ma'am? My mama, she's took awful sick."

Questions crowded in—how did you get in here? Why are you dressed like that? But those weren't the most urgent concern. "Sick? Where is she?"

"In the back of the wagon, ma'am. She was burnin' up with fever, but now she's cold, and she won't wake up, no matter how I shake her and call to her."

"The wagon? You mean a station wagon? Where is it parked? I'll call 911." Joan flipped out her cell phone, fumbled, and dropped it. It skittered under a table, and she had to grope for it. When she straightened up and turned around, the girl was gone. The hair on the back of Joan's neck crinkled, and she moaned aloud. How stupid not to have seen it at once! The girl was a ghost. Hoping she was wrong, Joan ran up and down the gallery, calling, "Hello? Hello? Where are you? Is anybody there?" But no, she wasn't wrong.

If she hadn't been living in the station, she would have closed up shop for a few days—or possibly forever—so as to duck the whole problem. She didn't *want* ghosts in her life. But she did live there.

The shelves next to where the girl had appeared were a repository for pewter mugs and tableware, much of it dating back to the Gold Rush. Over the next few

days, when not overcome by depression and inertia, Joan read up on the Gold Rush. Many of the wagon trains, she learned, had been overtaken by cholera. Imagine a girl whose mother is lying in the back of the wagon, dead of cholera. It wasn't hard to see how that awful feeling of helplessness might imprint itself on a pewter mug and show up, out of the blue, on a rainy afternoon a hundred fifty years later. At least it was a workable theory. Joan didn't actually know whether ghosts were stray bits of emotion that had gotten imprinted on physical objects, or whether they were . . . something else entirely.

She tried reading up on ghosts, but found it too difficult to pan nuggets out of the tons of black sand. Most of the self-proclaimed authorities plainly knew less than she did. Which was almost nothing.

Not a week later she came out of the lumber room, which was what she called the room full of old furniture, to find a man standing at the counter. She hadn't heard the bell at the shop door jingle. The man was wearing a long soiled coat that had once been gray and a three-cornered hat from beneath which a greasy ponytail curled down his back. Her nose informed her that he hadn't bathed in weeks. He was fingering a flintlock pistol in an engrossed way, as if he had a quite practical interest in its workmanship. The glass-fronted cabinet—she glanced across the room—in which she kept the early firearms was always kept locked, but now its door yawned wide.

"I've a need for this pistol," he said without preamble. "I should like to buy it, thankee." His voice was a gravelly croak.

"Yes, of course," she said. "It's—here, let me see the price tag." She reached for the pistol. She was close enough now to see that it wasn't one she remembered. The lock and barrel were almost free of rust. Also, there wasn't any price tag.

He pulled it back so she couldn't touch it, and glared at her distrustfully. Beneath dark, tangled brows he had the glittering eyes of a hawk. He slapped a coin on the counter. "This be enough?"

The coin was the size of a silver dollar, but yellow. The sun-bright circle almost gleamed with its own light. "I'd have to look it up," she said, stammering. "I think I have a catalog. Wait here while I find it." She had to go around behind a bookcase to haul out the carton of coin catalogs. Probably counterfeit, she said to herself. He's on his way to a costume party. Where he'll win first prize.

When she emerged with the catalog, the frontiersman was gone, and the pistol with him. Again, the front bell hadn't rung. But the coin remained. It turned out to be a gold doubloon—not rare, but in shockingly good condition. And not provably counterfeit, though eyebrows were raised because of its lack of provenance. The property tax bill was due in less than a month, and she paid it by selling that one coin.

The frontiersman's rank odor lingered in the shop for days. Sometimes she thought she could still smell it. More likely it was just the dodgy plumbing, but all the same she felt obscurely irritated. The girl had disappeared before she could do anything to help her, or even try, but she couldn't quite get rid of the frontiersman even after he was gone.

After the frontiersman, the ghosts began showing up more often. The weeping woman, the blind soldier, the golden-haired toddler eating an ice cream cone, the angry old man who thumped up and down the aisle with his walker. They never showed up when customers were in the store, only when she was alone. She tried ignoring them, tried shouting at them, tried chatting with them. They were impervious.

One of the very nice things about Ted was that he wasn't a ghost. She met him at a party some friends had invited her to. She had been only too glad to get out of the store for an evening. Ted was up from LA, where he was in accounting with a movie studio. In spite of his superficial physical resemblance to that asshole, she liked him at once. He kept fit by rock climbing, didn't smoke or do drugs, and wasn't a Scien-

tologist or a Republican. On their second date she mentioned in an offhand way (it was kind of a test) that she had been named after Joan Baez, and he had never even heard of Joan Baez. That was when she decided to sleep with him.

Ted wanted her to move to LA and live with him and probably get married eventually. The herpes didn't faze him. The only slight impediment to their impending bliss was that she would have to sell the antique store in order to move. By that time the ghosts were showing up almost daily, and she was overjoyed at the prospect of being rid of them. True, they might follow her to LA, but somehow she doubted it. In LA she might expect to see an occasional unicorn, or a centaur, or tiny winged people who left sparkly trails as they flew, but surely she would be able to shut the door forever on her crew of self-absorbed and gloomy shades.

But the store didn't sell, and didn't sell, and didn't sell. The problem wasn't that it was haunted; she wasn't about to disclose that to anyone, not even Ted. No, the shortage of parking was the sticking point—that, and the marginal value of the inventory, and the exorbitant cost of renovating the building to rip out the termite damage and bring the restrooms up to code. After two years on the market, there had been not a whisper of genuine interest. Her agent had gotten lazy about returning her calls, and Ted's weekend flights up from LA were getting spaced further apart.

And then one morning as she sat beside the cash register, watching the dust motes drift lazily across a stray beam of sunlight that had bounced off of something in the street and zigzagged in the front window by mistake, the bell above the door jingled and Mr. and Mrs. Behrens came in. They came down the central aisle slowly, turning this way and that. People who came into Station House Antiques usually reacted that way. The newcomers were both in their forties, well dressed, no more than middle height. The woman had mouse-brown hair and a washed-out complexion. The man was pudgy, cheeks florid, hair receding, and wore wire-rimmed glasses. They took their time working their way back through the store to the counter, their eyes wandering, snagging, being tugged free, snagging again. "We saw your listing on the internet," the man said. His English was only faintly accented, but even before they introduced themselves Joan had pegged them as probably German. "Can you tell us, is the property still available?"

By that time, she had forgotten placing the ad in the online marketplace. Figured she was doomed to spend the rest of her life swaddled in layers of cobwebs behind the counter of Station House Antiques.

"Yes, it's still available," she said. "I've had a couple of offers"—a lie—"but my agent felt we could do better." The agent who no longer even bothered to return her phone calls.

"May we take a look around?"

She twisted the key in the cash register. "Better yet, I'll show you around."

"I am Ludwig Behrens," the man said. "This is my wife Anna." He extended his hand and all but clicked his heels together. The light from the window glinted flat off of his spectacles, turning his eyes to round white slices of radish. "Have you owned it long?"

"No, not really. My uncle left it to me four years ago, in his will. At the time I knew almost nothing about antiques. Are you in the trade yourselves?" She ushered them through the low door into the lumber room. Massive furniture crowded in on them.

"In a small way. We have been looking for a retail opportunity since arriving in this country last summer."

"Something with enough floor space that we can be creative," Mrs. Behrens said, gazing around the lumber room with something like discomfort.

"Of course it doesn't look as large on the inside as it is," Joan said, "on account of the amount of stock. If you look at the numbers for the square footage, it's actually quite impressive. This used to be a real functioning train station. The tracks were torn out years ago, when the railway line was relocated down by the bay. The build-

ing is an official landmark, so you have to maintain the exterior, but there are no restrictions if you want to remodel the inside. Let me show you the upstairs gallery." And steer you away from the rusted plumbing.

While she was ushering the Behrens into the used-book room, her cell phone chirped. She flipped it out, saw that it was Ted. "Hi, sweetie. I'm busy right now. Can I call you back?"

"Busy?"

"I'm showing the station to some folks who are interested in possibly buying it."

"Wow! That is great news, hon. Call me later."

She could tell Ted was on the freeway because of the traffic noise. With a sudden fierceness she ached to be there beside him, riding in his Beemer in the land of golden sun, where palm trees swayed like frowzy-topped sentinels above a thousand blue swimming pools, instead of stuck in a mouldering train station in the hills west of San Jose.

Twenty minutes later, Mr. and Mrs. Behrens were back at the counter beside the cash register. The plumbing hadn't sent them rocketing out the door. "And of course you'll want to inspect the books," she said. "I'll have to arrange that with my accountant." Her accountant was the laptop, but they didn't need to know that.

"Oh, I don't think that will be necessary," Mrs. Behrens said. "We will plan to change the nature of the business ever so slightly. A downstairs tea room here, and Navajo pottery, and some things imported from Europe. It's really quite charming. But there are other possibilities on our list. Perhaps you will see us again."

Joan ushered them to the front door. "Auf wiedersehen," she said wistfully, waving.

Two days later, they were back. Ludwig Behrens slipped a hand into his coat pocket and drew out a piece of paper. "We have, in the interim, inspected a number of properties, and yours is still under consideration. If it's still available?"

"I've shown it a couple of times this week"—another lie—"but there are no other offers on the table, no."

"Good, good." Ludwig Behrens straightened his spectacles and peered at the piece of paper. "We have made a list of questions, the dimensions of various rooms and so forth. We have brought a tape measure. Would it trouble you if we were to undertake a detailed inspection?"

After measuring and sketching for an hour, they had a low-voiced conference, their heads bent together, Joan carefully giving them privacy. Then came questions about zoning and parking and the prevalence of earthquakes, which always seemed to arouse morbid fascination in foreigners, and then another conference. At last Ludwig Behrens strode toward her and stuck out his hand for her to shake. "My wife and I have decided. It is very suitable. But we do not want the stock, I think, except for perhaps a few items to be specified later. I assume you will find another dealer who will take the remainder off your hands."

"Yes, of course."

"Good. We shall instruct our agent to draw up an offer. Would it be convenient if he were to present it to you this afternoon?"

When they were gone, she tried to call Ted, but his voicemail picked it up. She left half of an exuberant message and then hung up in mid-sentence when she realized she was babbling.

The door jingled again. An old woman, purse clutched in both hands, advanced into the shop hesitantly. "I was just about to close for lunch," Joan said. But if the woman bought something, it was one less thing she'd have to pack up and try to sell to another dealer. "Can I help you? Are you looking for anything in particular?"

"I don't quite know," the old woman said, sounding puzzled, as if perhaps she had been, but now couldn't remember what it was. "No, my eye was just caught as I was passing by. I must have been down this street a hundred times, and I don't remem-

ber ever seeing your store before. That happens when you get old, you know. You think you're paying attention, when you're not. Things jump out at you, and you think, 'Wherever did that come from?'" She gazed around in awe. "Antiques! My goodness, what a trove!" Her face was spotted and deeply lined, her hair silver and sparse, her stockings thick and sensible. She set one foot in front of the other laboriously, as if her hips were arthritic. "I'm practically an antique myself," she said with a pinch of pride. "Can you guess how old I am? I'm ninety-three. Ninety-three. When I was born, Woodrow Wilson was president. Can you believe that?"

"I have some Wilson memorabilia," Joan said.

"Oh, I don't care anything about that. He was a dreadful racist, apart from anything else." The old woman craned her neck to peer at some fussyly clothed dolls on a high shelf, but then swayed a little and seemed to have trouble catching her breath. "My goodness." She looked around, spotted a high-backed chair, and sank into it. "Oh, dear. I felt quite faint for a moment there. Could I trouble you for a glass of water?"

"Are you all right? Should I call 911?"

"Oh, please don't. They always make such a fuss. Just the water will be fine." Between sips, she said, "I was having a—a discussion with my daughter this morning, and I believe it tired me out more than I realized. Which is odd, you know, because we didn't argue. I'm finished with all that. Finally. For years I've tried to help her." Sip. "All my life, it seems. And she always ends up as badly off as before, if not worse. At long last I've accepted that. All of it, including my own part in it. I felt quite kindly disposed toward her, when we spoke today. I told her I forgave her, and I do." Sip. "What I didn't tell her—I don't know that it would have served any purpose—was that I also forgave myself. Looking back on it, I don't believe I could have done a single thing any differently. There's something very freeing about understanding that. Today I don't believe I'd change a single thing about my entire life. It's all been perfect, perfect, even the parts that at the time seemed quite horrid. I expect you don't understand. You will, one day."

She set the glass on a table at her elbow and looked around. "Is that a gramophone? My goodness, look at that! I haven't seen one since—oh, since the forties. And you have records! I must look at them." She stood up, a little unsteadily—Joan was afraid for a moment she was going to have to catch her—and tottered over to the gramophone, an old hand-cranked model with a large bell. Three or four records were sitting beside it, and she picked up the top one. "Louis Armstrong—'King Porter Stomp.' We used to dance to this, when I was a girl. It was so jazzy! It made you feel quite alive, dancing to it, sixteen and you knew you'd be young forever. Could I play it? Does the machine work? I'd love to hear it again."

Joan didn't actually know whether the gramophone worked. Nobody had ever asked. She fitted the disc onto the turntable and inspected the mechanism uncertainly. "Here, let me do it," the woman said. She gave the crank a few deft twists and set the needle in the groove.

The tinny, scratchy sound of old-time jazz rang out in the station. "Oh, yes," the woman said. "Oh, yes." She took a hesitant dance step, then another. She set her purse on the chair, swung her arms, snapped her fingers.

The beat set Joan's toe tapping too. She marveled at the lively sound pouring out of the ancient gramophone. The clarinet and trumpet wailed, the bass and drums throbbed as if the band were right here in the room. The very floor was rumbling. The old woman danced down the aisle, skipping, nodding her head. Ninety-three and moving so nimbly?

The rumble got louder. Quite distinctly Joan heard a railroad train pulling into the station—the whistle, the deep chuff of the engine, the hiss of the brakes. The broad double doors at the rear of the room, which had once opened onto the platform, when there was a platform, had been boarded up for years, the windows painted over, but

when the old woman reached the doors and touched the latch they swung slowly, ponderously open.

A dazzle of milky light poured in, flooding the room. The woman danced out into the light, the music rippling around her, and her figure was slim, her hair dark, her step light and eager, and she never turned to look back. A conductor cried, "All aboard!" His bell clanged.

Joan moved hesitantly toward the doors, almost blinded by the radiance, trying to see. Something big was out there, and yes, it was a train, and the trumpet leaped and darted around the banjo while the trombone slid and the clarinet trilled, and the woman, young now, stepped up into the train as a spray of flower petals fluttered and swirled white and pink around her, and the conductor's bell clanged again and there were ghosts beside Joan now, walking with her as she drifted out onto the platform, the old man with the walker, who cast it aside and strode with a firm step, and the Gold Rush girl and the frontiersman, one by one they boarded the train in a gentle blizzard of flower petals, and Joan was in line behind the weeping woman, whose tears now flowed free around a radiant smile, and she reached out to put her hand on the side of the car so she could climb into the train feeling yes of course the joy of this flooding her now forever. But an arm in a dark sleeve reached across in front of her and barred the way, and she looked up, and the conductor's face was long and pale with bushy white eyebrows, a little like Uncle Frederick's but not really so very much, and the conductor said, "Not yet. Your time is not yet. Your task is to watch over the station."

She opened her mouth to wail a protest, it was impossible not to board the train, how could she not? But somehow she stumbled, as if her foot had come down on a step that wasn't there, and for a moment more she thought the train was starting to move, sliding sideways in front of her, she submerged in the engine's bone-deep rumble, and then suddenly she wasn't on the platform at all, she was engulfed in ordinary sunlight, lurch-staggering onto the freeway on-ramp where it cut close behind the store. She was hollow. She had been turned inside out. Head spinning, she nearly sat down on the pavement, but a rusty old pickup truck was bearing down on her at forty miles an hour. It honked, and she leaped sideways to dodge it and fell in the grimy bed of ice-plant where it sloped gently up to the back of the station. She sprawled among the wadded candy wrappers, the crushed and mutilated soft-drink cups, and started to cry.

All right, she said, get hold of yourself. What just happened? Feeling unbearably heavy, as if she were wearing the train across her shoulders like a stole, she picked herself up, winced in pain when she put her weight on a twisted ankle, and stared up in blurred confusion at the rear of the station. Thirty feet away, the rear double doors were shut as tight as ever.

Cars whizzed past her, their chrome lancing daggers in the sunlight. It seemed to take all day to walk around the building, limping, staring fixedly at the curb in front of her feet as if she might lose her way. A line from an old song, a spiritual, coiled into her mind like sweet smoke: "Don't need no ticket, you just get on board." Was that it?

Inside, the station was blessedly dark and cool. She noticed she was trembling, and shut her eyes and willed the trembling to cease. That didn't work, so she went and got a drink of water. The gramophone needle was going whicka-whicka-whicka at the center of the disc, so she took it out of the groove. The double doors were still shut, but strewn around them on the floor was a careless scatter of white and pink flower petals, which certainly hadn't been there before. She went to the doors and touched them, running her hands up and down the rough surface like a blind person. And started to cry again. Out there, just beyond the doors, was an ocean of joy so deep she had never imagined such joy could exist, and she had tasted it, it had filled her, and now it was gone and the doors were sealed shut again. She slid down to the floor and sobbed.

The tears dried up. Sitting on the floor, she saw the store at a new angle. It felt

empty, though it was still as packed with antiques as before. There were no ghosts now, that was it. The ghosts had gotten on the train.

She might have sat there all afternoon, but the phone rang. She got up, sniffled a little, and answered. It was the Behrenses' real estate agent. "I have an offer here for your retail property," he said, sounding just the right note of suppressed excitement. "I'd like to present it to you and your agent this afternoon. What time would be convenient?"

Her agent. The one she hadn't spoken to in months. "Well, I'll have to—" No, wait. She took a breath, and swallowed. "I'm sorry," she said. "The property is—it's no longer on the market. There's been a—I've changed my mind. About selling it."

"If you've received a better offer, I can talk to my clients and see if they might be—"

"No, you don't understand. I'm really not going to sell. I'm going to keep it."

He took a little convincing. He told her how disappointed Ludwig and Anna would be. He vented a gentle rasp of annoyance, testing whether she could be intimidated into feeling guilty. In the end, he signed off with a breezy assurance that he'd call again in a day or two in case she had reconsidered.

She hung up, sat on her stool by the cash register, and thought about that. He'd call again. She could still change her mind and sell. But if she stayed here, before long more ghosts would be bound to show up, and sooner or later the doors would open again and she could go out on the platform for just a minute and maybe wave to them as the train slid away, and touch the tip of her tongue to a drop of glory. If she sold the store and moved to LA, would she ever find this kind of station again? And where would the ghosts go, when it was shut down?

The old woman had left her purse sitting on the chair near the gramophone. And that was very bad. She might already have been a ghost when she came in, but she hadn't acted like one. If she had been alive, she was now a missing person, and the police would make inquiries, and when they found the purse they would ask Joan what had happened, and Joan would have to lie, and her lies had never fooled anyone for very long, apart from her mother.

Toss it in a dumpster. Drive down to Gilroy and toss it in a dumpster. And don't leave fingerprints. But on a whim, she snapped it open. There wasn't much inside—some Kleenex, keys, a billfold with a few dollars, an opened packet of hearing aid batteries, and a postcard.

It was an old-fashioned picture postcard. On one side was what looked like an Alpine ski lodge, but cupped in summer, perched on the side of a mountain amid a gorgeous spill of trees and flowers. On the other side was a three-cent stamp and a brief message written in blue fountain pen in a flowing hand: "Having a wonderful time. Wish you were here!"

When had postcards cost three cents to mail? The stamp was obviously old. It took Joan ten minutes to find the stamp catalog in the book room. When she saw what the stamp was worth, her mouth got dry. She'd be able to pay last year's taxes and then replace her sputtering, asthmatic Géo with a new Civic.

She's still there. You can drop by Station House Antiques and say hello if you'd like, though you probably won't see any ghosts. They never seem to come out when customers are around. The antiques business is lousy, but once in a while Joan picks up a valuable item that keeps her going for a few months.

She had a repair shop look at the gramophone to make sure it's in good shape. It's always kept dusted and polished, and there's a box of old-time jazz records sitting next to it, in case anybody who drops in wants to play one. Once in a while, somebody does.

And sometimes, when Joan is alone in the store, she puts on "King Porter Stomp." While it plays, she goes over and presses her ear against the double doors and listens for the train. O

A LARGE BUCKET, AND ACCIDENTAL GODLIKE MASTERY OF SPACETIME

Benjamin Crowell

When Ben Crowell was growing up, his only reliable source of science fiction reading matter was his elementary school's collection of Heinlein juveniles. These days we know that meeting an alien won't be as easy as grabbing a quick flight to Mars in a cigar-shaped rocket ship—but, in this story, Ben tries to have his hard-SF cake and eat it too.

Sidibé Traoré ended up as Earth's diplomatic representative because she was an astronaut who loved to pop the blisters on a sheet of bubble wrap. Sidi volunteered without any expectation of being chosen. What she did expect was that her training was about to become obsolete, so she decided to visit what little family she had left in Bamako before deciding what to do next with her life. On the way out the door of her apartment in Houston she was intercepted by her neighbor.

Mrs. Forrest leaned over her walker and squinted through her bifocals. "Cindy, darling, are you getting sick?"

"Afraid so, ma'am," Sidi said. "Thanks for watering my fern while I'm gone."

"Of course, dear. Hold on, I have something for you." She produced a little box of See's candy with a well-worn red bow on it.

"Oh, that's sweet of you." The thought of food nauseated her.

"Nuts and chews. If you don't need the bow I can use it again. The Mexican girl on the news says the aliens are practically in our lap already, because they sent us the radio signals from the spaceship, but the ship is coming in almost as fast as sound."

"Light." Her sinuses hadn't hurt this much since decompression training.

"She said sound. I don't see why they have to whiz on past like our whole world is just a whistle stop. Plenty of people like me would like to meet them. You know I get

along fine with colored people, so why should it be any different for ones with tentacles?"

"I'm sure they'd like to stop and visit, but the Bus is the size of a city, and when you're going that fast you can't stop and start again. That's why it just sort of loops around the galaxy and picks up representatives of species that are ready to graduate into the GalCiv." She told Mrs. Forrest she had to get to the airport.

Sidi didn't waste much time worrying about the gruesome things that the aliens had to do to a human body to boost it to near light speed in a matter of days. (The press used words like "iron maiden," "julienne," and "Frankensteining.") Nor did she agonize over the prospect of only having bug-eyed monsters to socialize with for the rest of her life, while relativistically compressed centuries rolled by back on earth. She wouldn't be picked. She'd only volunteered because—well, the U.S. astronaut corps was almost the only family she had left, and not to step forward—she knew the word the Americans would use: "chickenshit."

Her connection to Paris was going to be delayed because of weather. While they were taxiing in at JFK she got a call from Matti Karjalainen, who'd been on two long orbital missions with her. She didn't want to talk, so she let her avatar take a message and then played it back. *Bon soir, Sidi. Ah . . . I know you volunteered. I did too, but, well . . . I don't know about you, but a lot of us are having second thoughts. Slice you like French fries, ow, right? Cologne says now we have these infos about the procedure, they don't blame anyone that takes his name out of the hat. Anyway, I'm talking to a headhunter from SpaceX, and he says they like to hire ex-astronauts as managers. I told him Traoré is the Terminator, she never stops.* Her avatar had taken the headhunter's number.

On the monitor at the gate they were listing her flight as canceled, and the agent said the next one that might actually go was at five in the morning. Sidi sat down and checked her phone, and from the subject lines in her in-box it looked like there were a lot of messages similar to Matti's zipping around the tight-knit social network of the world's various astronaut corps. Her head was throbbing. It seemed like everyone was ducking out. Should she do the same?

It wasn't the kind of decision she wanted to make right there, feverish and sleepy in a deserted airport terminal. She fished the box of chocolates out of her carry-on and ate one, absentmindedly popping one of the bubbles on the packaging. She calculated that if she popped one bubble every three minutes, tuning out the rest of the world, it would get her through to five o'clock. She pushed her phone down into the bottom of her bag and didn't allow herself to look at it again until the last bubble was gone.

When she pulled it back out again at five, there were nineteen new messages, of which the AI had judged one from Zhang-Yu Wen to be the highest priority. *Hi, Sidi. I am sorry to bother you late at night in America. It's only that . . . I got a phone call from big party boss, and he says many candidates were scared away. He has seen the list, and now your name is number two and I'm number one. I'm just wondering, because my girlfriend is pregnant, and we're thinking to get married.*

The Galactic Civilization's automated diplomatic ship continued on its broad, pre-programmed circuit through the Milky Way, passing out of the Orion Arm and back into the Perseus Arm. Some seven hundred-odd representatives were now aboard. In one of its compartments, two of them were trying to set up diplomatic relations, with their artificial intelligences acting as translators and go-betweens.

"I can't negotiate on behalf of my entire genus," Sidi warned the alien. Its body was like a spider and an octopus *in flagrante delicto*.

Their AIs worked out a round of translation. "Your planet is also the homeworld of

... The Snow White woodcut Sidi had chosen as an avatar for the alien's AI raised its eyebrows and batted its delicate black lashes.

"Yes, the other hominids graduated into the GalCiv in earlier cohorts," she told her own AI's visual representation, which was the Caterpillar from *Alice in Wonderland*.

"But there is continuity between your cultures?"

"No," she admitted, knowing it would cost her in prestige to be unable to claim a closer relationship with species that had already graduated into the GalCiv. "They migrated off-world at some point, and they did a pretty good job of cleaning up after themselves. We do have a few artifacts from the Neanderthals that are very interesting. Chipped flint, bone flutes." Maybe that would count for something, like a high school yearbook picture that showed a future movie star playing tuba next to you in marching band.

"You smell good," Snow White said, then gazed raptly at a monochrome butterfly on her finger while the giant hairball she spoke for swayed closer to Sidi. Sidi forced herself not to flinch in her chair, the only furniture in the compartment. She remembered her first semester at MIT, fresh off the plane from Bamako, when she'd made the American students uncomfortable by standing too close to them. It was one of those cultural things that her American father had never thought to tell her while he was teaching her to read English from Dr. Seuss books.

She batted a tentacle away from her eye. "Cat, I need some clarification on that."

There was an invisible electronic powwow while the Caterpillar took a drag on its hookah and Snow stared off into the distance as lifelessly as if she'd returned to the printed page. "It's a ritual phrase," the Caterpillar said finally. It spoke in the slow-talking provincial Finnish accent she'd grafted onto it, a verbal plug-in module that Matti Karjalainen had given her as a going-away gag joke.

"Like what? Is it a compliment, like, 'Nice tie you've got there?' Sexual overtones?" These things were hermaphrodites, weren't they?

Another consultation. "It seems to be about dominance. You smell like you would be good to eat. But that's not the real meaning, just the literal one." She stifled a giggle at the way it said *leeeeeteral*. Cat was the closest thing to a human she was going to see for the rest of her life—unless she met an uplifted Neanderthal or something—so there was no point in hurting its simulated feelings. It occurred to her that the way she'd piled him together wasn't so different from the way her own body had been taken apart and then Frankensteined back together after being accelerated to match velocities with the Bus.

A ritual phrase. Maybe like saying *inshallah* automatically, or *bless you* when someone sneezed. Sidi told herself to look on the bright side. At least they had enough in common psychologically that she could understand the macho posturing. This was a promising contact, definitely a better prospect than any of the others she'd made since boarding the Bus as Earth's diplomatic representative. Should she tell the thing that she herself was fond of calamari in a lemon vinaigrette? No, she'd lose for sure if she tried to play the dominance game according to cultural rules that it knew and she didn't. Better to shift the battle to territory she was familiar with.

"We have a problem," she told the squirming mass of seafood salad. "When I meet with someone, I expect it to do its homework properly. Apparently you haven't bothered to learn anything of our customs. For an important meeting like this you need to provide bottled water and a tray of assorted muffins, and those need to be placed on a large conference table."

The crab-legs stopped threshing the air for a moment. "Virtual representations of these things would suffice?"

"Yes," pretending reluctance. "I suppose so." It wasn't as if the thing would have real muffins in its shipboard personal food supply.

"You should give the same things to me," Snow White translated, a doubtful expression on her two-dimensional baby-face.

"Of course."

"Very well," Snow White said.

"If you'll both step to one side," Caterpillar asked politely.

The two avatars jointly conjured the table and victuals. Sidi carefully pulled her real chair up to the virtual table, seated herself, and pretended to unscrew the cap from a water bottle. The medusoid whacked a simulated muffin with a knifelike appendage as if to slaughter it, and pretended to pop the halves into a different orifice than the one Sidi had been assuming was the mouth.

The relationship with the alien she thought of as Mopsy flourished and then foundered in a single day of ship time—220 years on Earth. Mopsy's curiosity about the caterpillar icon—"is that a *Homo erectus*?"—inspired an attempt at cultural exchange: Lewis Carroll, Mother Goose, and Dr. Seuss in return for some proofs in number theory. Then *Horton Hears a Who* led to a discussion of Earth's wildlife. By that evening they were in one of the Bus's big kilometer-wide compartments hunting cartoon mammoths (Sidi with a simulated spear, Mopsy bare-clawed). But the next morning when Sidi woke up there was a message for her from Mopsy, translated as *sorry things didn't work out better between us*, and the comm showed that Mopsy was blocking calls from her.

It wouldn't be long now until the Bus completed its circuit and this cohort was initiated into the mysteries of the GalCiv. Thirty-two days of ship-time had passed, and if nothing changed in the week she had left, it didn't look like Sidi would have a damn thing to show for her diplomatic efforts.

Feeling glum, she kept her regular breakfast date in the oxygen-breathers' refectory with the alien that she called Bonsai because it reminded her of a small, reddish pine tree. She slurped her millet porridge while Bonsai sat under the table and scraped daintily at the corn on Sidi's big toe. At least Bonsai really *did* want to eat her, as opposed to playing mind games about it. Too bad that they'd never been able to establish communication about anything more substantial than which tissues it could nibble at without hurting her. She hoped she was at least building up some of what the Chinese called *guanxi*, like giving a carton of Marlboros to your boss for the lunar new year.

She popped her daily blue pill—"Reduces depression, homicidal impulses, and gibbering!"—and clicked through the latest news from Earth as translated by Cat. French was a dead language now, English unrecognizable. A new world government had come to power and sent her its "vision statement," which ran to well over a hundred pages. She was to publish it to the other representatives (there was a note from Cat saying that he'd already done so) and realign her diplomatic efforts accordingly. The first page was a preamble about mankind's spiritual destiny, weasel-worded in ways that suggested it had been written by a big committee that didn't agree on much. She stopped and checked the later news. Yes, that muddled theocracy had fallen in a coup, so she could skip studying its manifesto. She wished that Earth could have come up with a more peaceful mode of cultural stagnation since she'd left. At least the population was back up to seven digits after that nasty war with the mitochondrial weapons. The species seemed too crotchety to admit that its only important job right now was to avoid extinction until it was time to graduate. Maybe it would have helped if the GalCiv had been able to explain to the primitives what graduation really involved. Was *H. sap.* expected to start vacating the planet to make room for the whales or the bonobos to take over in a million years?

Here was something interesting: a communication to her directly from an alien

planet. She remembered the species, cryogenic pools of silvery liquid that lived in vacuum and ate infrared. Early in the trip she'd wasted half a day trying to communicate with its representative, doing it on an ornery whim because the AI matchmakers had ranked the species 837th out of the 837 in the cohort for compatibility with *H. sapiens*. As far as she could tell the AIs had been absolutely right. She'd never succeeded in teasing even one word out of Pool. The thing reminded her of a laconic postdoc from Minnesota her roommate had once set her up with.

What could be the point of initiating direct contact from their homeworld? Wouldn't this cohort have graduated already by the time signals could make the round trip? She opened a map.

Aha! Pool had been one of the first species to come aboard. The Bus's path was roughly a circle (you don't take tight corners at ultrarelativistic speeds), and now they were closing the loop, their trajectory taking them right past Pool's home planet again. The signal had only taken three days, ship-time, to get here.

Esteemed human, we note with pleasure your visit to our representative. We regret that differences in our styles of thought may have made communication difficult. We operate by sequential computation, rather than the parallel style that we have learned is common in brains made of cellular tissues. As a group we can make up for this by cooperating on parallel trains of thought, but an individual of our race is at a great disadvantage in its ability to think at a pace that can match yours.

Sidi's heart thudded. A real lead! She jumped up, eliciting a squeak from Bonsai. "Sorry," she said, doubting that the apology would get across.

She headed for the liftshaft, reading as she went. She realized that she was only wearing one sandal, kicked it off and stuck it under her arm. Pool lived outside the hull, on the upper deck. Sandals wouldn't fit in a pressure suit anyway.

The GalCiv has tried to accommodate our special needs with AI support, but any binding decisions must be made by our representative, not an AI. We believe we may have found a solution to the problem. Hmm, still looking for a "solution" this late in the game? The implication was that Pool's diplomacy was going just as badly as Sidi's. The spacetime within the Bus's passenger compartment is nearly flat, but the region farther from the hull is highly nonEuclidean, and there are fringing fields in the space in between, strengthening exponentially as one moves outward. Our representative has noticed that time on its deck runs slightly more quickly than in the rest of the ship. Extrapolation suggests that if he was moved about ten meters farther out from the hull, his thought processes could be made comparable in speed to yours, probably without exposing him to unacceptable tidal forces.

"Probably!" *Merde*, you'd need guts to venture out near the maelstrom of magnetic monopoles and microscopic black holes that surrounded the ship like a swarm of gnats. Most likely you'd get sucked straight out into space and find yourself pureed into a soup of particles that the physicists back on Earth didn't even have names for yet.

The liftshaft accelerated her upward with an eerie lack of physical sensation. She skimmed the rest of the communique from the flimsheet, but it didn't say much more except to suggest the general idea that Pool might need her physical help carrying out the plan. She realized belatedly that she hadn't even commed him to let him know she was coming. She messaged him, wondering how much good it would do if his brain was really that slow. No wonder she'd had no luck before with two-way communication!

The topmost interior deck was for low-gravity, low-pressure anaerobes. She stepped into the vestibule, which, through some technomagic, functioned as an airlock without having any physical doors. This was where she kept her pressure suit—she'd insisted on bringing an Earth-tech skinsuit, since that was what she understood. At least it was modern enough not to need prebreathing. A companionway led up to another spooky airlock, and then to the weather deck.

She looked around and took her bearings. If she leaned way back she could get a view through her visor of the zenith, out ahead along the Bus's trajectory where the whole microwave sky shrank and doppled itself into a crazy fisheye view like a fuzzy little cotton ball. Her eyeballs were sneaking up sideways on these photons and clobbering them, making even the ones coming from behind the ship look like they were from out in front. As for the witch's cauldron of exotic particles that surrounded the ship, they seemed to be completely invisible. It was humbling enough to think about the godlike mastery of matter and energy that was needed to propel a giant spaceship so close to the speed of light, but even more of a comedown to be unable even to *perceive* the technology.

Over there was Pool's living space. The gravity on the weather deck was pretty low. She loped across the charcoal-black deckplates, reminding herself that she'd better not let her strides take her too high, if all relativistic hell broke loose only ten meters up.

There he was, looking as placid as ever in his little basin surrounded by Arabian Nights blobules. She was careful not to shine her helmet lamp directly on him. It would be a shame to start an interstellar diplomatic incident by boiling the ambassador.

Now what?

"Ah, hello, Pool? I realize that you can't process what I'm saying in real time, but anyway I'm honored to be invited back for a visit. Um, Cat?"

Her AI popped, seated on a protuberance that looked like a bidet, and blew a smoke ring. "Yes?"

"You know that message from Pool's home planet? I can't really discuss it directly with Pool because he doesn't think fast enough when he's by himself. Could you ping his AI?"

"Certainly. Do you want me to manifest it as an image this time?"

"Ah . . . what's that flying sofa thing from the Oz books? They roped it all together and sprinkled the powder of life on it."

"The Gump? Okay."

The bundle of furniture rose gracefully from the quicksilver like Venus from the sea. Its elk's head looked down at her, lordlike, from the plaque it was mounted on. "Hello again," it said in a thick American accent.

"Hello. Ah, I assume you've seen the message from your principal's home planet?"

"Yes, but I'm afraid I can't make any decisions on his behalf," it said, with its whiskery chin held high as if it didn't really care very much. It reminded Sidi of the dean's secretary at MIT. "It will take him a while to think it over."

"If we were to do this, what would his life-support requirements be?"

The Gump gestured with a palm-frond wing. "You can see that he doesn't need much. You'd need to keep him in one piece, and make sure he wasn't exposed to too much heat."

"So . . . a bucket or something?"

"That would be fine, as long as the bucket was cold. I think you could just leave it out here for a while and it would cool off 'enough."

"How big is he?"

"About twenty liters, a hundred kilograms."

"A big bucket, then, but I think I could still lift it in this gravity. And, what, we just use a tall stepladder to get him up there?"

"That might be difficult," the mounted head said, a little toss of its antlers giving a strong impression that any difficulty would be due to Sidi's inadequacy. "The physicists from the home planet sent some calculations—"

"—just a summary, please."

"He's affected by electromagnetic fields. Once he gets two or three meters up, they think the net force will be upward, and there may also be some lateral instability."

"So let me get this straight. I'm imagining tying a rope to the handle of the bucket, and it's swooping around over my head like a kite?"

"Probably."

"Probably. I see. So I think we want a lid for this bucket. How much tension in the rope?"

"Equivalent to a few hundred kilograms in Earth gravity."

"I'll need a pulley, then. And what happens if I lose control of the bucket-kite?"

"In the worst case, the Bus's automatic safety systems should intervene before he can fly off and accrete himself onto one of the micro-black holes."

"Good, no thermonuclear explosions, then."

"Probably not." A dismissive flick of a palm-frond wrist.

"Probably not." *Mon Dieu*, the AI seemed almost as crazy as the Oz character she'd chosen to represent it.

"We're quite certain there are good safety systems," it said. "After all, the Bus has been flying for half a million years. We just don't know the details."

"Safety" would mean the safety of the Bus itself. Maybe they'd zap Pool like a bug to keep him from blowing everything up. The ship's mysterious absentee landlords seemed benevolent enough, but there had to be a limit to what they'd tolerate. *Quand même*, the risk was Pool's to take. It looked like this plan was her best chance to accomplish something useful for her species, and it would be easier to ask forgiveness than permission. And anyway, what did she have to lose on a personal level? The unseen galactic top dogs claimed that it was impossible to explain much about what life would be like for the representatives after the Bus's circuit was complete, but it was clear that it was a one-way ticket. Maybe she'd stand around in a toga, reminiscing about Africa with the *erectuses* and *habilises* over brandy and cigars. Anyhow, this whole thing wasn't about her, it was about the job.

"I'm willing to help," she told Gump, "but it depends on whether Pool can make the decision soon enough."

She took her leave of the AI, wondering what to do next. How much could she trust these calculations? She imagined a bunch of silvery alien profs lounging in bathtubs around an equation-covered blackboard. They were extrapolating, and that was always risky. She retrieved the sandal from the airlock and came back out onto the deck. Hmm, it wouldn't take much of a pitch to make the sandal rise ten meters in this gravity, but throwing something straight up and then leaning back to watch it seemed like one of those tasks that was anatomically impossible in a pressure suit. She lay down on her back.

"Cat?"

He materialized over in the corner of her eye. "Yes?"

"I'm going to throw this sandal up into the air—I mean into the vacuum—or—well, whatever that stuff is up there. I want you to observe from ten meters to the side or so. You can do that, can't you?" She was vague on how his interface to the Gal-Civ sensors worked.

"Yes."

"Okay, so you can tell me how high it went, and catch the whole thing on video for analysis."

"All right."

She put the sandal between her palms like a Christian praying, then flicked it upward gently, being cautious about how hard she threw it. It took a long time to rise and come back down.

"Two point six meters," Cat said.

"Did anything look strange do you?"

"Strange in what way?"

"Like, ah, you know, violating the laws of physics?"

"Which laws of physics?"

"Never mind." *Strengthening exponentially*, Gump had said.

She fetched the sandal and launched it again, faster. It rose for about ten seconds, then it reached a certain height and suddenly it was as if it had been hit by a gale-force wind. It seemed to shiver like a fish and get swept violently upward, its languid spin becoming a propeller-blade blur. Then just as suddenly the same invisible giant's hand slammed it back toward the deck, straight at Sidi. She rolled frantically out of the way, inadvertently bouncing herself several meters above the deck before she came back down.

"Where did it hit?" she yelled when she had scurried to a stop.

"It's still falling," Cat said.

She looked, and he was right. It was coming back down at an ordinary speed again.

"Oh, *those* laws of physics," Cat said.

A bucket. Bargaining for material objects was surprisingly easy compared to sealing interstellar alliances. *I have X, you have Y. Let's swap.* It was a message that tended to translate well. Someone did have a bucket, she learned: a paranoid, fuzzy little creature that wouldn't allow her into the compartment where it spent all its time snuggled up in a pile of animatronic representations of its kind. Sidi didn't have what the fuzzy wanted, but she found someone who did, and constructed an intricate chain of trades. The sequence ended with four pairs of Sidi's cotton socks, which the final customer used to keep its pseudopods from drooping in the too-high gravity on the upper chlorine-breathers' deck.

An even more convoluted series of transactions got her a strong, flexible steel cable brought aboard as snack food by one of the high-gravity types. By this time she was known as the go-to girl for unobtanium. Species whose systems of communication were too foreign would bring in intermediaries to explain their wants. Sidi neglected her diplomatic duties. Cat started maintaining a database for her.

All she needed now was a pulley. Well, she did have a fancy engineering degree from MIT, didn't she? Compared to the technology they were surrounded by, a pulley was like banging two rocks together. Pulleys simple and compound, fixed and movable—she might be weak on grand unified theories, but this was the sort of elementary stuff she'd gone over a hundred times as a grader for freshman classes. Easy.

Except that it *wasn't* so easy. She didn't have a spool or a grooved wheel. No axles or bearings, no ratchets, no hooks or clips or eye-bolts—not even a paperclip or a roll of sticky tape. Archimedes, she was certain, would have been an abject failure if he'd had to work aboard a starship.

No. *Merde*, that was those little blue pills encouraging her to make excuses. Archimedes would have done something halfway competent. If she corrected for the effect of the happy-zap drug, things were much worse: she was failing at this plan, just as she'd failed at everything else aboard the Bus, and now that she'd failed, she could spend the rest of her life in solitary confinement contemplating her failure. Was that assessment more objectively reasonable? How would she know, with the pills skewing her judgment? It was intolerable. She ran into the bathroom, got out what was left of her forty-day supply of the pills, and dumped them in the toilet.

She was pounding on the mirror when a comm came in. She made an effort to compose herself. "Cat, can you take it?"

"It's Mopsy, and Snow says it's not about a trade."

"Mopsy? All right, put it on." She grabbed a wad of toilet paper and came out of the bathroom.

A three-dimensional Mopsy and a flat Snow White sprang up in the comm portal.
"Mopsy, I'm . . . surprised to hear from you."

Snow made an operatic gesture with her arms. "Sidibé Traoré, has it been long enough? / Will you please reconsider your cruel rebuff?"

"I—what?" She tried to be unobtrusive about wiping her nose.

"Putting out that vision statement / really took me in *parfaitement*."

"Um, that actually doesn't rhyme. The 'n' and the 't' are silent, and the accent is supposed to be on the last syllable. Why are you speaking in poetry?"

"The books were mostly in verse." Snow looked anxious. "Is prose better for this? I wasn't sure."

"I think it depends on what 'this' is."

Snow wrung her hands. "When you disdained even to take a share of the kill, I—"

"Wait, what kill?"

"The mammoth." Now Snow was the one holding back tears.

"Oh." The cartoon mammoth they'd brought down? Some kind of cultural misunderstanding—did Mopsy see her as the dominant one now? "You smell good," she said experimentally.

The tentacles drooped, and Snow clasped her hands and lowered her head. Bingo, *ça y est!* But now she did feel a little cruel. She felt a contrite impulse to offer Snow the wad of toilet paper.

"It's all right, Mopsy. Pecking order isn't quite as important to our species as it is to yours. Would you like to resume cultural exchanges?"

"You don't need to keep up the pretense. I understand now."

"You do?"

"Once I read *If I Ran the Zoo*, I understood that your species' carefully cultivated image as a pushover was a ruse."

"You did?"

"Yes. Your true self-image shows through clearly in your children's literature: the cages, the urge to conquer. Then when I went back over the vision statement that Cat put out, I saw it for the honey-tongued propaganda that it really was."

"Of course. You're more sophisticated than that."

The tentacles undroopified a little, and Snow hazarded a little smile. "But this covert commercial network you've been building, it's masterful."

"Why . . . thank you."

"I assume that your true object is nothing less than—" Snow's eyebrows ascended.

"Ah, you guessed—"

"Complete galactic domination—" Snow stamped her feet and squealed "—I knew it!"

Mopsy must think Sidi was a lot smarter than she really was. Even to dominate this cohort would be a goal as absurd as teaching an army of cats to march and salute.

"Rumors do get around," Snow continued, seeming to mistake Sidi's nonplussed reaction for reticence. "When the day comes, and we link up with the GalCiv, obviously some of us have to end up at the top of the food chain."

Sidi hoped that was only a metaphor. "Of course you wouldn't want to let anyone else in on our little secret."

"No, never!" Snow waved a finger *no*, and Mopsy imitated her, a little overenthusiastically, with a tentacle. "But is there some way that my people could be . . ."

"Included? Why yes, I think so. Ah, tell me, Mopsy, how much weight can those limbs of yours lift?"

Sidi finished her preparations for the flight of the kite-bucket, already regretting

her impulsive decision to dump the pills, and dreading what it would be like to come off of the drug the next day. She woke expecting a Richter-nine headache, black storm clouds, delirium tremens, and demons with pitchforks.

Nothing.

She formed a suspicion that the pills had been a placebo. So what did that say about her? Had they determined through psychological screening that she was some kind of natural-born hair-shirt hermit? "Oh, send Traoré, she won't mind. Went on three dates in four years at MIT. She won't mind a life sentence to solitary confinement. Give her a placebo to make her happy." Well, to hell with them, those UN witch-doctors had all been dead of old age for weeks anyway. She wasn't doing this for them, she was doing it because she wasn't a chickenshit, and that was reason enough for her. She felt surprisingly happy, in a hopeless, bitter, world-hating sort of way. She got dressed, and found herself humming an old Malian pop song her mother had liked.

Le dimanche à Bamako, c'est le jour de mariage.

Sunday in Bamako is wedding day.

The comm burbled. "Yes."

The Gump appeared. "My principal has agreed to the experiment."

"How's that, Pool?" Sidi, Cat, and Gump lay side by side on their backs, watching the upside-down bucket dangling lazily over their heads at the end of the cable.

There was a pause. She watched the ripples playing across the quicksilver and suddenly realized that she felt seasick. *Ouf.* She'd never thrown up in a pressure suit, and didn't want this to be her first time. Was it the low gravity? Surely she wasn't that much of a tenderfoot in space. She swallowed uncomfortably.

Cat relayed a message from Pool. "He says it's good." Another pause. "More."

"Mopsy, play out another ten centimeters, okay?"

"Ten centimeters," Snow White's voice confirmed over the suit's comm from down below in the airlock.

A snake-wiggle climbed lazily up the heavy cable, then suddenly accelerated as it entered the fast-time zone. The bucket pitched back and forth as fast as the buzz of a fly's wing, and Pool sloshed to and fro much faster than he should have been able to without spattering himself over the brim.

"Ask him how that is," she told Cat.

"He says that's good," Cat translated, this time without any noticeable pause. So this was it: godlike manipulation of time and space. Now she just needed to get fitted for a toga. "He says that the derivative of x squared is two x ," Cat continued. "I think he's trying to confirm that we have two-way communication."

"Okay, tell him that the integral of x is a half x squared."

The cable seemed tighter now. The quicksilver in the bucket rippled, and another wave of nausea swept over her.

"He says you forgot the constant of integration," Cat said.

"Oh—" She found out what it was like to vomit in a pressure suit, and it was every bit as unpleasant as she'd been told.

"Sidi?" Cat asked. "Gump wants to know if something's wrong. (He seems a lot less haughty now, maybe Pool took him down a notch.) Please don't be angry, he says. Pool was right about the constant of integration, you know. I think he just doesn't understand about human standards of tact and diplomacy."

"No, no, I'm just having a physical problem, a minor physical problem. It's all right, everything's okay." She closed her eyes and turned the helmet's air blower on full blast. "Uh, tell him I'm honored that his civilization chose to send me that communiqué, and I'm confident that we'll have a very productive session today."

"I'll try to translate that."

Sidi tried experimentally to get some of the mess off of her face by shaking her head, and found that it was a serious mistake. Her brain felt like it was rattling around inside her skull in the low gravity.

"Gump doesn't think Pool understands," Cat said.

"Well, he understands that we've got two-way communication, right? And he knows about the communique, right? So how about confirming that I received the communique."

"Well, Gump doesn't think Pool really understood the diplomatic aspects of the communique. His species didn't actually write that, apparently."

"They didn't?"

"Er, no. Gump says the pools suggested the physics thing, but fitting it into the framework of a human-style diplomatic note—they couldn't have come up with that. All of that was ghostwritten for them by another species, from what Gump has heard."

"Oh, I see."

"Now Pool says every integer has a unique prime factorization."

"We're not here to trade math trivia. *Euh*, don't translate that, but . . . we're never going to get anywhere at this rate. Have Gump ask him if he thinks he'd be okay with another ten centimeters of altitude."

"He says that's fine."

This time she was careful not to watch the cable or the bucket. Her stomach felt as tight as the head of a drum. It couldn't just be the gravity, because she'd been up here twice before and felt fine. Miserably, she decided that the pills hadn't been placebos after all.

"Wow, he's much faster now," Cat said. "We can't really translate in real time. He's spewed out a bunch of math, five hundred pages worth, with his personalized annotations of the passages he thinks might be hard for someone of your . . . that might be hard for you."

"Good, thank him for initiating the cultural exchange—"

"He won't understand that."

"Okay, well . . . all right, access the library, and feed him the complete works of J.S. Bach, and . . . and Shakespeare"—that would give the supercilious puddle something to chew on, no matter how fast its brain was now.

The response was almost instantaneous. "He says the sound structures are mostly a trivial corollary of mathematical principles already discovered by his species, and some of them aren't even self-consistent. The Shakespeare plays . . . he thinks there was a transmission error, because he did an intensive statistical analysis, and he couldn't detect any information patterns."

As a diplomatic effort, the first flight of the kite-bucket had been a disappointment, but "give me a place to stand, and I will move the world." The trial flight established the fundamental engineering principle involved. Soon afterward, she got her first hint that it would turn everything on the bus upside-down. A comm came in from the chlorine-breathing ameoboid. The portal showed not just the ameoboid but a grid of a half-dozen other generic avatars as well. One of them waved its stick-figure finger at Sidi.

"Do you intend to be completely merciless about exploiting this monopoly?" it demanded.

Monopoly?

"Excuse me, but I'm a little confused," Sidi said. She shot a glance at Cat, who shrugged. "Why are there so many avatars at once?"

The stick man turned and mimed communication with the one next to it, which

then passed the message down the chain. While the chain continued, the first one replied directly to Sidi. "It will take a moment for the translation, but I can give you a general answer. The chlorine-breather feels that it has been taken advantage of. When you originally spoke to it to negotiate for the bucket, the translation was rough, but it thought it understood well enough to carry out what seemed to be an innocuous trade. Now that we realize the full dimensions of your plan, we need more accurate and nuanced communication, and we've only been able to achieve that by constructing a sequence of AIs to minimize the size of the leaps from one conceptual framework to the next."

The message reached the ameboid, which gestured wildly with its cotton-socked pseudopods, its cilia sproinging out as if someone had given it an electric shock. Sidi took advantage of the delay for return translation to look up the species of the passengers whose AIs formed the chain. She stifled a chuckle when she saw that Bonsai was one of them.

"First it says essentially what I just told you," the final stickman said. "Then it asks you to show mercy for its delicate condition."

"Condition?"

"It's ripening for fission." The blob did look a little narrower around the waist than it had before. "It's been trying to suppress the urge—that can be terribly uncomfortable, I hear—but it doesn't think it will be able to hold out until after we make the transition into the GalCiv. It doesn't want its two daughter-selves to graduate while they're still in a postmitotic stupor. They'd need at least three or four weeks postpartum to get back up to a normal mental level."

Sidi finally understood. They'd heard rumors that she'd helped Pool to visit the accelerated-time zone, but they didn't know any of the details of how it worked. "It wants to buy some time?"

"Buy?" The stick figure turned and started the translation before Sidi could explain that it was only a figure of speech.

The ameboid got a jury-rigged birthing nest, but its delegation was only the first. Everyone aboard the Bus was feeling the pressure of time as the end of the voyage approached. Sidi stopped taking incoming comm messages, and she posted Mopsy outside her door to keep from being bothered at all hours. She'd heard once that the hardest part of building an observatory was laying the road up to the mountaintop, and something similar seemed to apply here. The first big scramble was to round up a crew of volunteers who had pressure suits (or who, like Pool, could live in vacuum without them), and get them, along with a big cargo net full of cannibalized construction materials, up into the fast zone. A crow's nest sprouted in the exotic vacuum, seeming to observers down on the deck like one of those time-lapse photos of a flower blooming.

Once Sidi finally found a good straw boss (Mopsy scared everyone too much), she moved upstairs herself, and once again had time to sleep and eat occasionally. The original mast and crow's nest had by now metastasized into a Daliesque favela.

Sidi's office was at the top, in the fastest space they could push into before construction materials started misbehaving in mysterious ways. She learned not to turn her head too quickly to keep from insulting her inner ear with pseudo-Coriolis forces. The room, made from a food container one of the big hot-Jupiter types had brought aboard, was small and cold, and when it was quiet (which wasn't often) you could hear the air hissing out through the badly assembled vacuum seals.

Her desk was a door-panel resting unevenly on two crates. She peered down over its edge at an alligator-pancake who was prone to hysterics. "I don't think it really meant to step on you," she told it.

OF COURSE I DIDN'T. The centaur-anemone stamped half a dozen of its hooves. The vibration made the leaking seals hiss louder. IT WAS AN ACCIDENT, said the word-balloon that popped up over its head (for Sidi had found that personified avatars made conflict resolution more difficult). I DIDN'T SEE HIM THERE ON THE FLOOR OF THE AIRLOCK.

MY PLANET IS NOT WITHOUT MILITARY RESOURCES, the pancake shot back heatedly, its word-balloon rearing up higher than the centaur's and whacking at it.

"Please, please, this doesn't need to be an interstellar incident, does it?" Sidi said. "Monsieur crepe-croc, perhaps you could start manifesting a red flag above yourself, to make yourself more . . . ah . . . visible in high-traffic public spaces? Now I'm afraid I have another appointment. If you two could adjourn this discussion to the anteroom, I think we already have on hand the ingredients for a successful settlement. Could I suggest a cultural and scientific exchange? I understand that the crocs have a very ancient and fascinating type of dance suite that takes a full lunar month to perform."

She ushered them out as forcefully as she could without stubbing her toe on the croc. The clock showed four minutes until her next appointment. She put her head down on her arms the way the nuns had made them do when she was a little girl, so long ago and far away in Bamako. She had a hammock stashed in one of the crates, and if she strung it up taut and high, almost to the ceiling, the four minutes could become a fifteen- or twenty-minute nap. It wasn't too hard to sleep through the occasional static discharges from the monopoles and strangelets whizzing by just above the ceiling—she'd gotten used to them like a Chicagoan with a bedroom window facing the "L." She really ought to prepare more for this next meeting, but she was feeling so very, very tired.

She remembered the day she'd thrown the happy pills in the toilet, and how she'd thought of herself as being condemned to life in solitary confinement. A little solitude would be heavenly right now. Oh, the croc was basically a good sort, just a little hot-headed. But why couldn't any of them deal with their problems without coming to her?

She was sure that the pills would have long since run out, although she had only a vague idea of how much time had passed since that day on her biological clock. Four or five months? It was endlessly confusing, the way everybody's time ran at different rates.

Complete galactic domination. At the time she'd had to grit her teeth to keep from laughing at how silly it was. How could Mopsy's rumor of a suspicion of an absurdity have become so real, and such a heavy weight to bear?

Cat's voice: "There's someone who wants to talk to you."

Had she already been asleep? She checked the time. "It isn't time for the appointment yet, not according to my clock."

"No, not that, it's someone from outside the ship."

"We are outside the ship."

"No, I mean someone from the GalCiv. There's a ship the size of a sunflower seed, it's matched trajectories with us. Someone's on board. I don't know, maybe it's an AI or a personality upload, or maybe the crew had a swig from a bottle labeled DRINK ME."

"So this is it? We meet the representative from the GalCiv? They're early, though, aren't they?" There'd be hell to pay for all the dismantled equipment. Maybe that was why they'd shown up early. "All right, put it on."

"They're here physically. I think."

"Physically? All right." It must be really bad, then. She squared her shoulders. She'd done the best she knew how to do. Obviously she was a perfect little *merdeuse*, and now it was just a relief that it was all over.

A bipedal hominid in a toga was sitting there in a human-style chair that hadn't

been there before. His flattish nose reminded her of a pet guinea pig she'd had once. He handed her one of two snifters of brandy—those hadn't been there before either. "It's not easy, is it?" he said in an Eton accent.

"Are you from the GalCiv? I hadn't thought it was time yet for . . . whatever it is that happens. I guess now I need to hand things off to you. Sorry about the mess, that's all my responsibility. The others aren't to blame."

"You're correct that it wasn't really time yet, but sometimes a cohort is a little fast out the gate, eh?"

"What?"

"This is it, you graduated yourselves," the *Homo erectus* said with a vague wave at their surroundings. "What you've done on your own is the 'whatever it is that happens.' No great trick to it really, just grab the spacetime tiger by the tail and don't let go. I'm afraid there's no handing things off, though. Bloody hard work, being a god-like master of matter and energy."

"I don't understand."

"Means you're in charge."

"No!"

"Fraid so. There'll be some formalities, of course, but your cohort has obviously chosen to treat you as their leader."

"I was only—you can't—I don't really know what I'm doing. They didn't vote for me or anything."

"Vote? Oh, pardon me, this cultural overlay isn't very good, but I think I know what you mean. We can't use voting as the criterion, much too species-specific. Generally we go by body count. Your cohort managed to harness relativistic technology to meet its common goals, and you did it without having anyone eat anyone else or blow them up or anything dreadfully unpleasant like that."

"You would have let that happen?"

"Oh, everyone's already been taken apart and put back together once, and we still have all the data we would have needed for re-Frankenstein the victims."

"It's just that I'm not . . . nobody else . . . I was only taking care of things the best I knew how." She was having trouble catching her breath.

A wry grin. "Same here, old girl, same here." ○

SHINER

M64

snapped by Hubble
is not an evil eye
but rather
a black eye
as should be expected
at the very least
when two galaxies
so violently collide.

—G.O. Clark

THE BRIDE OF FRANKENSTEIN

Mike Resnick

Mike Resnick is, according to *Locus*, the all-time leading award winner, living or dead, for short fiction, most of which has appeared in *Asimov's*. His recent books include *Starship: Flagship, Hazards, Stalking the Dragon, and Dreamwish Beasts and Snarks*. His remarkable new story may forever shift your perception of a certain cultural icon.

April 4:

What am I doing here?

We have no servants, we never go out, we never have company. The furniture is all decrepit and ugly, the place always smells musty, and although the rest of the village has electrical power, Victor refuses to run it up the hill to the castle. We read by candlelight and we heat with fireplaces.

This is not the future I had envisioned for myself.

Oh, I know, we made the usual bargain—he got my money and my body, and I got his title. I don't know what I thought being the Baroness von Frankenstein would be like, but this isn't it. I knew he owned a centuries-old castle with no improvements, but I didn't think we'd live in it full-time.

Victor can be so annoying. He constantly whistles this tuneless song, and when I complain he apologizes and then starts *humming* it instead. He never stands up to that ill-mannered little hunchback that he's always sending out on errands. And he's a coward. He can never just come to me and say "I need money again." Oh, no, not Victor. Instead he sends that ugly little toady who's rude to me and always smells like he hasn't washed.

And when I ask what the money's for this time, he tells me to ask Victor, and Victor just mumbles and stammers and never gets around to answering.

Yesterday he sent Igor off to buy a generator. I thought he'd finally realized the need to upgrade the castle. I should have known better. It's in the basement, where he's using it for one of his simple-minded experiments that never brings us fame or fortune. He can use the generator's power to make a dead frog's leg twitch (as if anyone cares), but he can't use it to heat this drafty, ugly, boring castle.

I hate my life.

May 13:

"My creature lives!"

That's a hell of a scream to wake up to in the middle of the night. Of course his damned creature lives. The little bastard nagged me for money again today.

May 14:

Well, finally I saw the results of all those months' work today. Victor was so damned proud of this hideous monster he'd created. Let me tell you: it is ugly as sin, it can barely speak, you'd need a microscope to find its IQ, and it smells worse than Igor. *This is what he's been spending my fortune on?*

"What is it?" I ask, and Victor explains that it isn't an it, it's a he. He is sitting on the edge of a table, just staring stupidly at a wall. Victor takes me by the arm (he always has chemicals on his hands; I hate it when he touches me) and pulls me over toward the creature. "What do you think?" he asks. "Do you really want to know?" I answer, and he says yes he really does, so I spend the next five minutes telling him exactly what I think. He doesn't say a word; he just stands there with his lower lip trembling and the same expression on his face that my brother had when his puppy drowned all those years ago.

The creature makes a soothing noise and reaches out to Victor, as if to comfort him. I slap his hand and tell him never to touch a human. He whimpers and puts his hands in front of his face, as if he expects me to beat him. I wouldn't even if I could; this blouse is hard enough to clean without having to wash any disgusting monster yuck off it.

"Don't frighten him!" snaps Victor.

Which is a perfect example of how out of touch with reality he is. The creature is about six football players and a weightlifter all rolled into one, and I'm just a helpless woman who spends an inordinate amount of time wondering why she didn't marry Bruno Schmidt. All right, he's bald and fat and his teeth are rotting and he's got a glass eye, but he's a banker, and his house doesn't have a monster in the basement.

May 25:

I went fishing in the stream today, since Victor is too busy making notes to notice that we're almost out of food. (Of course, we wouldn't run out so often if we had a refrigerator, but then we have no place to plug it in anyway.)

So I'm standing there in my rubber boots, fishing rod in hand, and I hear a noise behind me, and I turn to look because a woman alone can't ever be too careful, and what has happened is that Victor has let the creature out for some exercise, or air, or whatever hideous eternally damned creatures get let out for.

When I turn to face him he stops and stares at me, and I say, "You lay a finger on me and I'll scratch your eyes out!"

He kind of shudders and walks around me in a huge semi-circle, and winds up about thirty yards downstream, where he stares at the fish. Somehow they seem to know he's not trying to catch them, and they all cluster around his ankles when he wades into the water, and he smiles like an idiot and points to the fish.

"Fine," I say. "You catch four for dinner and maybe I'll even cook you one."

Up to that minute I would have sworn that he didn't understand a word, that he only reacted to tones of voice, but he leans over, scoops up four fish, and tosses them onto the grass where they start flopping around.

"Not bad," I admit. "Now kill them and we'll take them back to the castle."

"I don't kill things," he says in a horrible croaking voice, which is when I discover he can speak.

"Okay, eat yours while it's alive," I say. "What do I care?"

He stares at me for a minute, and finally he says, "I am not hungry after all," and he begins wandering back to the castle.

"Fine!" I shout after him. "There will be more for us!"

If there's one thing I can't stand, it's an uppity creature.

May 27:

"Don't you realize, my dear," says Victor, his narrow chest puffing out with pride, "that no one has ever accomplished this before?"

"I believe it," I say, looking at the creature, who seems to get uglier every day. "But that doesn't mean it's anything to brag about."

"You just don't understand," says Victor, and he's pouting now, like he does whenever I point out the obvious to him. "I have created life out of the disparate pieces of the dead!"

"I understand perfectly," I say. "Who do you think's been paying the bills for all this?" I point at the creature, who is busy staring off into space. "That left arm should have been my new stove. That right arm is my carpet. The left leg is my automobile. The right leg is a central heating system. The torso is my new furniture. And the head is indoor plumbing that works."

"You are being too materialistic, my dear," says Victor. "I wish I could make you see that this creature is of inestimable value to science."

I look at the mess my husband has made of his laboratory. "If you're going to keep him," I say, "at least give him a mop and teach him how to use it."

June 1:

I am sitting on a chair I have dragged out to the garden because I can't stand the smell of Victor's chemicals, and today I am reduced to reading *Life* and *Look*, because the Bavarian edition of *The Wall Street Journal* is late again. I had to sell all my stocks to pay for Victor's endless experiments, but I still follow them and compute how much I'd be worth if I had just married Bruno Schmidt, or maybe some doctor who, if a patient died, let him *stay* dead.

Anyway, I have dragged a small table out to hold the magazines and my iced tea. I could have asked Igor to do it, but I'd sooner die than ask him for a favor. So I am sitting there reading, and I hear an earth-shaking *clomp-clomp-clomp*, and sure enough it is the creature, out for his daily airing.

"Good afternoon, Baroness," he croaks.

I just glare at him.

He notices my magazines. "Are you reading?" he asks.

"No," I say coldly. "I am speaking to an animated nightmare from the deepest pits of hell."

"I don't mean to distress you," he says.

"Good," I said. "Go halfway around the castle and try not distressing me there."

He sighs and walks away, and I go back to reading. After a few minutes my magazine is covered by a huge shadow, and I look up and the creature is standing next to me.

"I thought I told you to—"

His hand juts forward with a delicate golden flower in it. "For you," he says.

"Thanks," I say, taking it from him and tossing it onto the ground. "Now go away."

Maybe it is the way the sun hits him at just that moment, but I could swear a tear trickles down his cheek as he turns and walks away.

June 3:

Today I caught him in the wood-paneled library that should have been my pride and joy but is now just my daily escape from the boring reality of my life.

"What are you doing here?" I demand as I enter.

"I was bored, just sitting around," he answers. "I asked permission to go into town, but the Master"—that's Victor—"doesn't want anyone to see me yet. He told me to read some of his books instead."

"Can you read?" I ask.

"Of course I can," he replies. "Is it so surprising?"

"Fine," I say with a shrug. "Go read. You'll find Victor's scientific books on the other wall."

"I have no interest in them," he says.

"That's not my problem," I say. "I can't help but notice that you're standing right next to a row of romances by Jane Austen and the Brontes. They'll be wasted on you."

"I think I would like romantic stories," he says.

"That's disgusting!"

"Do you really think so?" he asks curiously.

"I said so, didn't I?" I reply.

"Perhaps that is why the Master spends his nights in the laboratory," he says.

I pull a thick book off the shelf. I feel like pummeling him with it, but I don't think he feels pain, so finally I just thrust it in his hands and tell him to get out of my sight.

June 4:

He lumbers up to me while I am outside reading the *Journal*, which has finally arrived.

"What is it now?" I demand irritably.

"I have come to thank you," he says.

"For what?" I ask.

"For this." He lays the book on the table. "I read *A Christmas Carol* last night. It was very uplifting." He pauses for a second, staring into my eyes with his cold dead orbs. "It is comforting to know that even Scrooge could change."

"Are you comparing me to Scrooge?" I ask angrily.

"Certainly not," he answers. Another tiny pause. "Scrooge was a man."

I stand up and lean forward, bracing my hands on the table and glaring at him. I am about to give him a piece of my mind, to explain that I'm going to speak to Victor and insist that we donate him to some university, when a big hairy spider appears from nowhere and races across my hand and starts crawling up my arm. I scream and shake my arm, and the spider falls to the ground.

"Kill it!" I yell.

He kneels down and picks the spider up in his hand. "I told you the other day," he says. "I don't kill things."

"I don't care what you told me!" I snap. "Stomp on it, or crush it in your hand—but just kill the damned thing!"

"I have *been* dead, Baroness," he replies somberly. "It is not an experience I would wish upon anyone or anything else."

And so saying, he carries the spider about fifty feet away and places it on the branch of a young sapling.

I don't even notice when he comes back to pick up the book. I am too busy thinking about what he said.

June 7:

The next day it is *Wuthering Heights* and then it's *Anna Karenina* and finally he reads *Gone With the Wind*, which is making so much money in the bookstores that even Victor couldn't run through the royalty checks.

"You're developing quite a taste for romance," I say as I find him in the library again. It is the first time I've initiated a conversation with him. I don't know why. I suppose if you spend enough nights alone you'll talk to *anyone*.

"They are heartbreaking," he says with a look of infinite sorrow. "I thought romances had happy endings, like *A Christmas Carol*, but they don't. Heathcliff and Catherine die. Anna and Vronsky die. Scarlett loses Ashley, and then she loses Rhett."

"Not *all* romances end unhappily," I say. I think I am arguing with him, but I wonder if I am not trying to comfort him.

"I remember, as though through a mist, the story of Arthur and Guenevere." A body-wrenching sigh. "It ended poorly. And so did Romeo and Juliet." He shakes his massive head sadly. "But it does explain a lot."

"What do a bunch of tragic romances explain?" I ask.

"Why you are so bitter and unhappy," replies the creature. "The Master is a wonderful man—brilliant, generous, thoughtful, and he is constantly saying that he is very much in love with you. Clearly you must feel the same emotions toward him or you would not have married him, and because all such romances end in tragedy, you behave as you do from resentment at what must be."

"That will be quite enough!" I say. "Take whatever book you want, and then keep out of my sight for the rest of the day."

He picks up a book and walks to the door.

Just before he leaves, I ask: "Did Victor really say he loved me?"

June 8:

The toady brings me my breakfast on a wooden tray while I am still in bed. I stare at his misshapen body and ugly face for a moment, then have him set the tray down on my nightstand.

"What is this all about?" I demand.

"The creature is afraid that he may have hurt your feelings," answers Igor. "I tried to explain that it is impossible, but he insisted on preparing your breakfast. Then at the last minute he was too frightened of you to bring it here himself."

"What do you mean, it's impossible to hurt my feelings?" I say.

"I have never known it to happen, Baroness," he answers, "and I have been with the Master longer than you have."

"Maybe we'll have to do something about that," I say ominously.

"Please don't," he says so earnestly that I stop and stare at him. "You have abused me, physically and verbally, since the day the Master brought you to the castle, and I have never complained. But if my services are terminated, where is an illiterate hunchback who left school at the age of eight to support his ailing mother to find employment? The townspeople laugh at me, and the children tease me and make up terrible songs about me. They even throw things at me." He pauses, and I can see he is struggling to control his emotions. "No one in the town—in *any* town—will ever give me a job."

"You're still supporting your mother?" I ask.

He nods his head. "And my widowed sister and her three little ones."

I just stare at him for a minute. Finally I say, "Get out of here, you ugly little wart."

"You won't speak to the Master about terminating me?" he persists.

"I won't speak to Victor," I tell him.

"Thank you," he says gratefully.

"He probably wouldn't have listened anyway," I say.

"You are wrong," says Igor.

"About what?"

"If it comes to a choice," says Igor with conviction, "he will always side with the woman he loves."

"If he loves me so much, why is he always working in that damned laboratory?" I say.

"Perhaps for the same reason the creature did not bring you the tray himself," says Igor.

I am still thinking about that long after he has gone and the eggs and coffee have both grown cold.

June 9:

Today is the first day that I willingly go down to the laboratory since the day after Victor created the creature. The clutter is awful and the stench of chemicals is worse.

Victor looks startled and asks me what's wrong.

"Nothing is wrong," I say.

"The townspeople aren't coming to burn the castle down?"

"It's an eyesore," I agree, "but no, no one's coming."

"Then what are you doing down here?" he asks.

"I thought it was time you showed me what you've been doing day and night."

Suddenly his whole homely face lights up. "You mean it?"

"I'm here, aren't I?" I say.

There follows one of the most boring afternoons I have ever spent in my life, as Victor proudly shows me every experiment, failures as well as successes, plus all his notes and all his calculations, and then explains in terms no one could possibly understand exactly how he created the creature and brought it back to life.

"That's fascinating," I lie when he's finally done.

"It is, isn't it?" he says as if it is some great revelation.

I check my wristwatch. "I have to go upstairs now."

"Oh?" he says, clearly disappointed. "Why?"

"To make you your favorite dinner."

He smiles like a child looking forward to opening his Christmas presents. I try to remember what he likes to eat.

June 14:

I encounter the creature in the library.

"Igor thanks you."

"It was nothing," I say.

"By raising his salary, his mother can now remain where she is. *That* is something."

"I looked over the ledgers," I answer. "He went fifteen years without a pay raise."

"He is very grateful," says the creature.

"If I fired him," I say, "Victor would just go out and find an uglier, clumsier assistant. Handling money and running his life in an orderly fashion are not his strong points."

"He seems much happier this past week."

"He is obviously pleased with the results of his experiment," I say.

The creature stares at me, but doesn't respond.

"Have you found any happy romances yet?" I ask.

"No," he admits.

"Then since the tragic ones upset you, why keep reading?"

"Because one must always have hope."

I am about to say that hope is a greatly overrated virtue. Instead, much against my will, I find myself admiring him for clinging to it.

"For every Romeo, there must be a Juliet," he continues. "For every Tristan, an

Isolde." He pauses. "There are those who say we are put on this Earth only to reproduce, but the Master has shown there are other ways to create life. Therefore, we must be here for a higher purpose—and what higher purpose can there be than love?"

I stare at him for a moment, and then find myself pulling *Pride and Prejudice* off the shelf. I hand it to him, and do not even shudder when his fingers touch mine. "Read this," I say. "Not every romance ends tragically."

I wonder what is happening to me.

June 16:

Victor looks upset as he sits down at the table for dinner.

"Is something wrong?" I ask.

He frowns. "Yes. Something is missing."

"From the table?" I ask, looking around. "What is it?"

He shakes his head. "No, not from the table, from the laboratory's office."

"Has someone stolen your notes?" I asked.

He looks confused. "Stranger than that," he says. "My cot is missing."

"Your cot?" I repeat.

"Yes," he replies. "You know—where I sleep when I finish working late at night."

"How odd," I say.

"Who would steal a bed?" he asks.

"It seems very strange," I agree. "Fortunately there's another bed in the castle."

He looks confused again, and then he stares at me for a long moment, and then, suddenly, he smiles.

July 2:

"Are you sure?" asks Victor.

"We can't turn him loose in the world," I say. "What could he do to support himself? I joked about it with him this afternoon and said he could always become a wrestler, that he looks the part of a villain."

"What did he say?"

"That he wants to be loved, not feared—and that he doesn't want to hurt anyone."

Victor shakes his head in amazement. "What kind of brain did Igor bring me, I wonder?"

"A better one, I think, than you had any right to expect," I say.

"Almost certainly," says Victor. "But that will have no effect on the way people will react to his appearance."

"It could destroy him," I say.

"Literally," agrees Victor.

"If we want him to stay," I tell him, "then you know what we have to do."

Victor looks at me. "You are quite right, my dear," he says.

July 3:

I find him in the library, where he spends most of his time these days. He is sitting on the oversized chair that Victor and Igor constructed for him, but the second he sees me he gets to his feet.

"Have you spoken to the Master?" he asks nervously.

"Yes," I say.

"And?"

"And he has agreed."

His entire massive body seems to relax.

"Thank you," he says. "No man, no *person*," he amends with a smile toward me, "should live his life alone, even one such as myself."

"She won't be pleasing to the eye," I warn him. *Or the ear, or the nose*, I want to add.

"She will be pleasing to *my* eye," he answers, "for I will look past her face to the beauty that lies within."

"I'm surprised you want this," I say. "I'd have thought all those tragic romances would discourage you."

"It may end unhappily," he acknowledges. "But that is better than it never beginning. Would you not agree?"

I think of Victor, and I nod my head. "Yes," I say. "Yes, I would agree."

Then there is nothing left but to send Igor out to start visiting the graveyards again.

I hope Victor finishes work on the new project by Christmas. I can hardly wait for the five of us to sit around the tree, a happy family unit. Maybe it won't end well, but as my new friend says, that is no reason for it not to begin. ○

NEXT ISSUE

JANUARY
ISSUE

Hugo and Nebula winner (not to mention NASA scientist) **Geoffrey A. Landis** returns, after too long an absence, with his latest hard SF story, "Marya and the Pirate." In it, we find a resourceful space-hijacker tangled up (for better *and* worse) with an innocent—though no less resourceful—crewwoman on the very ship he's trying to boost. Popular Coyote-series scribe **Allen M. Steele** recounts "The Jekyll Island Horror," a tale of an eldritch, well, horror from shores unknown menacing the coddled landed gentry of the titular isle; Hugo winner **Robert Reed** raises "The Good Hand," a taut story of former allies become enemies, and an imaginary film we're sure many cineastes would *kill* to see; new talent **Felicity Shoulders**, in her second story for us, "Conditional Love," in which a doctor at a rather unorthodox children's clinic sanctions an even more unorthodox adoption; **Carol Emshwiller** takes us deep into the "Wilds" where a desperate woman on the lam with her ill-gotten gains must escape the intentions of a rather unusual mountain man—our money's on the mountain man; **Chris Roberson** reimagines the adventure pulps through his Celestial Empire universe, not to mention the origins of a very familiar hero, in "Wonder House"; and **Steve Rasnic Tem** travels the interstellar spaceways to deliver "A Letter from the Emperor" with unexpected consequences for the recipients.

OUR
EXCITING
FEATURES

Robert Silverberg plumbs the silt-strewn depths off the coast of ancient Greece in search of "The Antikythera Computer" in *Reflections*; **James Patrick Kelly**, in *On the Net*, plaintively cries out, "Dude, Where's My Hovercar?"; **Paul Di Filippo** brings us "On Books"; plus an array of poetry you're sure to enjoy. Look for our December issue on sale at your newsstand on November 10, 2009. Or you can subscribe to *Asimov's*—in classy and elegant paper format or those new-fangled downloadable varieties, by visiting us online at www.asimovs.com. We're also available on *Amazon.com's Kindle*!

Brian Stableford's recent novels include *Sherlock Holmes and the Vampires of Eternity* (Black Coat Press) and *The Moment of Truth* (Borgo Press). Recent non-fiction includes *The Devil's Party: A Brief History of Satanic Abuse* (Borgo Press). He is making good progress with his project translating the major works of early French scientific romance; five volumes featuring all the relevant work of Maurice Renard will appear in the early months of 2010 and a further five collecting work by J.H. Rosny later in the year. In his newest story for us, Brian turns away from the past to imagine the future. We know that a warming Earth may present us with a world of difficulties, but then again . . .

SOME LIKE IT HOT

Brian Stableford

"Gaia likes it cold."

—James Lovelock, *The Ages of Gaia*

Gerda Rosenhane fell in love with Kelemen Kiss—who did not like his forename and insisted on being called Kay—at the age of six, and somehow avoided ever falling out, in spite of all the customary childish quarrels and jealousies, adolescent metamorphoses and adult shifts in perspective. She was able to fall in love with him in the first place, and to sustain their relationship for many years thereafter, because they spent their childhood living on the same street in Strasbourg, within walking distance of the European Parliament.

The resilience of their relationship was greatly aided by the fact that Gerda and Kay had the same birthday, March twelfth; they always celebrated it together as children, thus founding a tradition that extended far into adulthood.

Under other circumstances, the cultural differences between Gerda, who was Swedish, and Kay, who was Hungarian, might have been immense, but they not only lived on the same street, they attended the same school: the so-called New International School, whose pupils came from the assorted nations of the EC, but where all the classes were taught in English. Everything in their world tended to be prefaced with the label "New," even though the practice was getting rather old. As beneficiaries or victims of New Internationalism, however, they were certainly united in their cultural affiliations in a way that even their immediate families did not entirely understand.

Another circumstance that helped Gerda and Kay find common cause in their early days was that they only had one parent each, and that the parents in question, busy about the ever-problematic business of running Europe, were almost entirely absent from their quotidian lives. Gerda's father, an EC bureaucrat, had died on a fact-finding trip to the vanishing Arctic ice cap before her second birthday, a victim of the treacherously melting ice; Kay's mother—a much-married woman—had resumed her briefly interrupted career as a celebrity model as soon as she had recovered her figure after the relevant divorce, which was finalized not long after her pregnancy came to term.

At six, Gerda believed, with an innocently boundless conviction of which only six-year-olds are normally capable, that Kay was her other half—or, because she had a precocious love of language, her "inevitable counterpart." They did, in fact, look uncannily alike, apart from the fact that Gerda was very pale of complexion, blonde and blue-eyed, while Kay was dark, black-haired and brown-eyed. "Like opposing pawns on a chessboard," Gerda's mother once observed, rather unkindly—quickly adding, for the sake of kindness, even though it wrecked the analogy: "But one day, when you're grown up, you'll be a queen."

Even at the age of six, Gerda had been able to reply, "I can't, Mommy. We live in a democracy."

When Gerda and Kay started at the NIS, the fact that all its classes were taught in English was only mildly controversial, but by the time they reached their final year it had become a running sore of angry contention. This was not because anything had happened in the meantime to the ever-dubious reputation of the United Kingdom, which was still the Crazy Man of Europe, but because it was universally recognized that the NIS practice of offering classes in English had nothing to do with far-from-merry England and everything to do with an "American cultural hegemony" that was supposed to have died in the first half of the twenty-first century, and whose inertial persistence within the World Wide Web generated a good deal of World Wide Resentment. Pragmatism insisted, however, that if any language were ever to get the children of Europe's elite talking like a true community, English was the only possible candidate, so English survived while "American cultural hegemony" became effectively synonymous, on European lips, with "the poisonous ideas that got us into this unholy mess."

The unholy mess in question was, of course, the CC. Hardly anyone called it the Carbon Crisis any more, as if merely spelling out its name might somehow make the catastrophe worse. Indeed, such were the mysterious ways in which euphemism operated, that it was often re-expanded, with calculated absurdity, as "the Cubic Centimeter"—except in England, where the cultural significance of the letters CC was as farcically out of step with the rest of Europe as everything else. There, the unholy mess was routinely referred to, in a similar spirit of perverse flippancy, as the Cricket Club, even though—as the smart kids at the NIS were fond of pointing out, in order to demonstrate that the Second Great Depression hadn't entirely robbed the world of its sense of humor—the only things England had that remotely resembled crickets were itsy-bitsy grasshoppers, which no one ever hunted with clubs, or even packs of hounds.

Long before she came to the end of her schooldays, Gerda had grown used to thinking of her relationship with Kay as an unholy mess, but it wasn't the same kind of unholy mess as the CC, even though the CC had already become tangled up in it. The CC was all about unwelcome overheating, but Gerda's love for Kay had never had a chance to overheat, because Kay had never given it a chance to do so. When Gerda first confessed to Kay that he was her other half, her inevitable counterpart, he agreed, but his casual manner made it obvious that he didn't really understand.

It soon became painfully clear to Gerda that he understood the analogy in a very different way. He thought that they were like non-identical twins: that his idea of "inevitability" was that they were and would always remain pseudo-siblings, as close as close could be but in an inviolably non-erotic sense. As time passed, although his sexual indifference never became a hostile jet of ice-cold water chilling the force of her emotion, it definitely functioned as a frustrating gust of carbon dioxide, warm enough in its fashion but fatal to wholehearted flamboyance.

Because she continued stubbornly to yearn for him, in a pathetically desperate fashion, Gerda grudgingly accepted and adapted to Kay's insistence on thinking of her as a sister. By slow degrees, as she passed through puberty and matured into an adult, she even managed to half-convince herself that perhaps it was for the best; romance was, after all, an obsolete twentieth century delusion born of a world careless of the deadly Cubic Centimeter, blithely unconscious of the holocaust to come. She, as an apostle of New Internationalism, owed her first and greatest dedication to whatever part she might be able to play in the Great Crusade for the Salvation of Civilization.

There were, of course, many parts available in that great drama, which was an end that lent itself to many means, but Gerda and Kay were MEP kids in an era when European politics was proudly recovering the old dynastic dimensions that it had briefly forsaken in the twentieth century. There was a tacit expectation in the NIS that the best of its students would become the MEPs and EC bureaucrats of the future, and that all other vocations were second-rate. Kay was never in any doubt that he would follow in his father's footsteps, but Gerda was not at all sure that she wanted to follow in her mother's. This was not because of any difference in the quality of the role models that Miklos Kiss and Selma Rosenhane provided, but did have something to do with the fact that they were routinely opposed in key debates, Miklos being an orthodox Gaian utterly dedicated to the war against global warming, while Selma represented a constituency that had seen significant local benefits from the shift in climate and was not at all averse to keeping them, in spite of the nasty problems that were being caused elsewhere.

While Gerda and Kay were children, their parents flew home on a regular basis to visit their constituencies—Selma Rosenhane to Kiruna, Miklos Kiss to Szeged—but the need to maintain the continuity of their NIS schooling and conserve their NIS-based social lives meant that the only times Gerda ever saw Sweden and Kay saw Hungary were during the long summer vacations. There was a sense in which they both felt even closer to the beating heart of EC politics than their parents did, but that sense of closeness affected them differently. The fact that it was his father who currently had a seat in the chamber never seemed to Kay to be anything more than a mere technicality, and Kay lived in the expectation not only of one day stepping into his father's shoes but also of finding them a perfect fit. Gerda, on the other hand, was not so sure that her mother's shoes were the correct size, or the most apt design; in particular, she was not sure that her mother was sufficiently passionate in the cause she represented.

Kay and Gerda remained united, however, in the conviction that they had been born with a mission to change the world, and that their schooling constituted an intense training-program that would allow them to carry their mission through. The Strasbourg chamber was still afflicted by the Curse of the Thousand-and-One Interpreters, but in the corridors of the NIS there was no need for such barriers to understanding. Even the six-year-olds there knew that they were the future in embryo, whose responsibility it would be to steer the New Old World through the climatic ravages of the CC. Such subsidiary tasks as defending the EC against the economic ravages of the New New World of Asian Slow Developers—whose brief days as Asian

Rapid Developers had recently run into the bumpers at the end of the Great Historical Track—were also on the agenda, but the focal point of all their hopes, fears, and endeavors was the Cubic Centimeter.

Kay was a trifle envious of Gerda's summer holidays in the Far North, not because they took her away from him for weeks on end—which always left her own heart more than a trifle desolate—but because they gave Gerda an opportunity to see snow. The snow in question was not, admittedly, in her immediate vicinity, but on the as-yet-undefrosted mountaintops that formed Kiruna's western horizon. Snow was snow, though, and everyone knew that it was soon to become extinct, except in Antarctica, where the colossal mass of the great ice-sheet was not yet in a tearing hurry to be gone. Snow was symbolic of Gaia's ongoing decline; it was her favorite dress, and all true Gaians loved it. Gerda had never known the ravages that snow and ice could inflict on populations for whom winter was Hell, but she nevertheless contrived, during her summers in Kiruna, to absorb something of the traditional local terror. She never liked snow herself, and became impatient with Kay's reverence.

"Green is supposed to be Gaia's color," she told Kay ostentatiously when they came together again after the summer that divided the Elementary and Secondary sectors of their NIS education. "There's plenty of green in Kiruna nowadays. The New Agricultural Revolution is just as spectacular in Sweden as it is in Greenland and Siberia. Nobody there wants the old winters back."

"Szeged may not be the hell on Earth that Southern Italy and Spain have become," Kay retorted, dutifully reciting the Gaian party line, "but it's still bearing the cost of your New Agricultural Revolution. I know that your population's expanding as people from the drowned coasts are relocated, but it's tiny by comparison with the numbers whose livelihoods have been wrecked. We live in a democracy, remember. Anyway, I hate spending summers in Szeged. My great-great-great-grandfather should never have moved from the mountains to the city. It's still tolerable up there, even in July—so they say."

Everyone in the International School was an expert in European geography by the age of eleven, and most of the pupils were fairly well up in European history, in spite of its appalling intricacies, so Gerda was able to reply: "But the mountains that your ancestors came from are in Rumania now. If your ancestors had stayed where they were, your father wouldn't be a Hungarian MEP. He'd be a tourist guide showing crazy English people around one of Count Dracula's alleged castles."

"The real Dragulya was a Magyar, and therefore quintessentially Hungarian," Kay pointed out, attempting to claim the intellectual high ground, as he always did before going on to state the obvious. "Anyway, he'd be a Rumanian MEP instead. He was a born politician. Everybody says so."

Even at eleven, Gerda knew that Kay's arguments carried real weight. The Greenlanders, Laplanders, Siberians, and Kamchatkans were tiny in number by comparison with the southern Europeans who had been displaced by rising sea levels or seen their agricultural bases shrivel beneath the effects of devastating heat waves and violent storms. Even the Siberian Oligarchs paid lip service to Gaian ideals, like ancient would-be saints crying "Lord, give me chastity—but please, *not yet!*" Even so, it never occurred to her to modify her gathering political convictions simply because Kay, whom she loved so desperately, did not share them.

Much later in life, Gerda came to suspect that the peculiar dynamics of their personal relationship might have intensified their political opposition. She suspected, too, that the true—subconscious—reason for Kay's failure to understand that her beliefs were correct, while his were seriously misled, was his refusal to admit that he really was her other half, her inevitable counterpart. Even while they were still at

school, she could not help believing that there was a sense in which Kay could not really believe what he claimed to believe, but must be a victim of delusion, of some strange arcane spell cast upon him by an inability to connect with or comprehend the wisdom of his heart.

Although Kay claimed, as all committed Gaians did, that his ambition to reduce the levels of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere was purely based in reason and utilitarian calculation, Gerda came to suspect, even before she completed her education, that it was really based in unthinking idolatry, and that in worshiping Gaia, he and the rest of the vast democratic majority that he aspired to represent were merely cherishing the chains of an ancient bondage.

Gerda, on the other hand, became firmly convinced that the world needed a new Mother, if it needed a Mother at all—and her conviction of that was as firm as her love for Kay. Her love for her own mother was just as firm, but it was increasingly infected with a conviction that Selma Rosenhane was a member of the opposition for all the wrong reasons. Had Selma been born in Szeged, like Miklos Kiss, she would have been a committed Gaian, because that would have been the obvious way to gather votes and the most useful source of profitable alliances. Hungary was hardly in the front line of the CC, having no coastline and still being ten degrees north of the Creeping Tropic, but the only pro-change nation with which it had a border was Ukraine, which was only pro-change because it was in Russia's pocket, and Moscow was now the hapless puppet of the Siberian Oligarchs.

Selma Rosenhane was no Laplander, ethnically speaking, but Lapland was her vote-cropping turf; her political allegiances and alliances were forged in the hinterlands of the Arctic Circle, on the shores of the New Blue Ocean, whose present shore-dwellers—especially the immigrant “converts” to whom it seemed a land of limitless opportunity—did not take kindly to the fact that the rest of the world had taken to calling it “the Methane A-Bomb” since the ice cap had disappeared and the waters had started soaking up the sunlight. Selma was, however, too canny a politician not to play the Gaian game; she not only paid lip service to the idea that the CC was a global disaster, but accepted it. Even in her own opinion, she was merely one of the worst of the vast multitude of bad Gaians who deplored the way the world was going but did not want to make the personal sacrifices required to return it to its old stability.

Gerda, by contrast, became an honest and devout anti-Gaian, who wanted to find a new stability rather than returning to the old one: a warmer, more passionate Earth Mother, who did not care to dress in snow and ice, who did not love a world that was cold and bleak. She admitted that the ecosphere might not be able to find a new stability unaided, but that was because the ecosphere was under Gaia's dominion. If the ecosphere could not achieve a new stability unaided, Gerda thought, then it was up to humankind—a humankind intellectually and materially liberated from Gaia's dominion—to discover and impose one. That would certainly require a more profound change in human behavior than a patchy migration from the Creeping Tropics to the New Temperate Zones—but who, in their right minds, could possibly believe that Gaia's humankind was so perfect as not to require real and profound change?

Kay did not seem to understand, at first, that Gerda was not simply following in her mother's footsteps in taking up an anti-Gaian stance. When they both stood for election as Student President in their final year at the IS, thus coming into open conflict for the first time, Kay tried to take advantage of their mutual birthday party to persuade her not to do it—and, indeed, that the platform on which she intended to stand made her a traitor to her own people as well as the entire human race. It was, by coincidence, the first birthday party they had entirely to themselves, in one of

Strasbourg's most carefully air-conditioned restaurants—an indulgence for which Selma Rosenhane and Miklos Kiss had grudgingly agreed to pay the bill.

"Just because you've seen snow in the distance, my dear sister," he said, sternly, "doesn't mean that you're a real northerner. You're Strasbourg through and through. Your mother might have been sent here to give the barbarians a voice, but your mission in life ought to be to carry the good word in the other direction. It's up to the children of the Arctic MEPs to explain to the up-and-coming generation why the fact that atmospheric warming might make Novaya Zemlya into the new Caribbean and turn Siberia into the world's grain basket is not adequate compensation for the devastation of the Mediterranean, even if one only takes economic costs into account. We all have to be better Gaians now than we've contrived to be before—better *practicing* Gaians I mean—else the world is doomed. All opposition, wherever it's based, lends dangerous support to the reckless and the gluttonous, encouraging them to continue their bad habits. Anyway, I'm bound to win—you'll be humiliated."

"The point, beloved," Gerda riposted, affectionately, "is not to worship Gaia more devoutly, but to cast her idol down. She has held the world in icy thrall too long. Now that spring is here, the task at hand for humankind is not to preserve what vestiges of winter we can for as long as possible but to make proper preparations for glorious summer. And whether you win or not, and however large your majority might be, you're backing the wrong horse. We're the third or fourth generation that has battled with its conscience over carbon restraint, and people will soon be exhausted by the toils of the losing battle. Gaian politics is on the point of collapse; it's only a matter of time before the balance tips and the opposition catches fire. All the true cause will need to bring about a revolution in ideas is a clever torch-bearer."

"You?" he said, with an unintentional hint of a sneer that was a stab in the heart, not so much because it was a sneer as because it was so utterly casual.

"Maybe not," she admitted. "But somebody with ideas similar to mine. The slogans that will win the future are ours. FREE THE CARBON. WAKE UP TO WARMTH. BIO-MASS IS OPPORTUNITY. HEAT IS GOOD. GO WITH THE FLOW, NOT AGAINST IT. EVOLUTION, NOT DEVOLUTION. PROGRESS, NOT REGRESS. Shall I go on?"

"Do you really think the voters will go for that sort of crap?" he asked her bluntly, effortlessly coming all the way down from the intellectual high ground he had initially tried to occupy. "Here in Strasbourg I mean, not in the ex-frozen wastes of northern Sweden."

"Maybe not," she replied, "but a true statesman's job is to change public opinion, not to reflect it. You might win this battle, by courtesy of historical inertia, but you can't win the war. You can't stop progress, and the CC really is progress, no matter how frightening it seems."

"Frightening? It's more than frightening, sister. It's costing lives—billions of lives."

"Everybody has one life, my love, and nobody loses it more than once. It's Gaia's world that can't sustain the present population, and Gaia's people who've produced it regardless. Maybe a better, warmer world can sustain a larger human population, and maybe it can't—but there's every chance that it will sustain a wiser population, because it will need a wiser population to create and sustain it."

"You can't dismiss the misery of billions of people with that kind of smart rhetoric."

"And you shouldn't try to sustain that misery with stupid rhetoric."

It was at that point that the argument came close to spoiling the meal, and the birthday—which was something that neither of them wanted.

"Anyway, this student presidency thing is kids' stuff," Kay told Gerda, relenting his tone a little. "It's a game. We won't be going into battle until we actually graduate from uni—which is why you still have time to switch sides and join the White Knights. In real life, if not in proverbial wisdom, it's the side that wins the battles

that wins the war, and the Gaian majority is solid. It won't disappear in our lifetimes unless the methane bomb goes off and the CC turns into the Venus Effect. School politics is only play-acting, but we'll be embroiled in the real thing soon enough. Do you really want to be stuck in the struggling opposition? You don't have to step into Selma's shoes, flying the flag of prevarication for avaricious Eskimos and the Siberian Oligarchs—there are plenty of other things you might do. Your father was a bureaucrat, working on the day-to-day amelioration of the crisis, and there'll always be more than enough to do in that direction. If you don't want that, you could always work for me. We've always had a useful camaraderie, and every great front-man needs great back-up."

"There's a world of difference," Gerda replied, sadly, "between being friends and being a team." Because she was exactly the same height as he was, she was able to look him straight in the eye without any implicit disadvantage, and she knew full well that blue eyes were better equipped for staring, but she took the fact that he eventually looked away as solid evidence of the virtue of her cause.

Kay won the NIS presidential election hands down, just as he had predicted, but Gerda wasn't unduly downhearted. The game had a long way to go before the final whistle. Kay might have put the first point on the board, but Gerda felt, passionately, that history and evolution really were on her side. As with all the other gods and goddesses that humankind had ever worshipped, the ideals that Gaia stood for were more honored in the breach than the observance. In Christendom, the meek had conspicuously failed to inherit the Earth, and even the loudest of Gaia's preachers continued to breathe out more than their fair share of carbon dioxide, without ever managing to dampen civilization's industrial flamboyance.

Gerda and Kay never discussed the possibility of going on to the same university after leaving the NIS. Kay took it for granted that the tacit parting of their ways introduced into their lives by their increasing commitment to opposing political ideologies would extend to an actual parting of the ways, and Gerda accepted the assumption—but she was able to leave it to Kay to insist that they meet up at least once a year to celebrate their birthday.

"I'll never give up hope of bringing you into the fold," he told her. "I'll keep on trying to win you over."

"So will I," she promised.

Even Kay, of course, could not step directly into his father's shoes after university, mainly because his father was still wearing them and fully intended to go on doing so for another ten or twenty years. That was a normal situation for ex-IS students to be in, and the conventional career path of the school's elite had to accommodate that period of delay. Most went to Brussels, which had clung on to the greater part of its bureaucratic functions when the legislative chamber had decamped, in order to serve as cogs in the administrative machine while they waited for power-charged slots to open up, and that was what Kay did. Gerda, on the other hand, decided to stay on at her own university—Bern—as a postgraduate researcher.

When she communicated this decision to Kay on their twenty-second birthday, during a meeting in Budapest, where he had taken his own degree, he was not at all surprised. He even seemed to take a certain satisfaction in her decision, as if he imagined that he could take some credit for it. Mistakenly—mistaking her motives had become second nature to him by now—he jumped to the conclusion that she was planning to abandon politics permanently, having realized the folly of setting up a campaign-tent outside the Gaian encampment.

"It's a wise move," he told her, smiling to demonstrate his good will. "Academic life is a safe haven, especially for . . . what was the title of your course, again?"

Gerda knew that Kay had studied International Relations, as a good MEP kid should; he, on the other hand, only contrived to remember that she had not. "Practical Botany," she reminded him.

"Right," he said, putting on a show of vagueness. "I knew it sounded as if it had something to do with flowers, even though it was really about crop engineering. Good decision—plant engineering is hotter than ever. It's not just a matter of tweaking staple crops to help them adapt to changing climatic conditions, is it? The necessity of compensation for insect decline has forced the engineers to be more adventurous. And it's still the cutting edge of carbon sink technology, even if it hasn't delivered yet."

"Plant engineering is crucial to the world's future," Gerda agreed, as she had at least twice before, when Kay had condescended to make similar remarks on their previous birthday meetings. His affected vagueness was intended to assist him in maintaining the appearance of knowing where the intellectual high ground was, even though his ignorance of the intimate details of genetic engineering prevented him from operating there. It never worked, and Gerda always took a certain delight in watching him flounder as he tried to pretend that he knew and understood more than he did.

"I've heard good things about contemporary work on hemp and . . . er . . . those primitive trees that were among the first colonists of the land," Kay said, blushing when he was momentarily unable to conjure up the second term.

"Cycads," said Gerda, helpfully. "Gymnosperms that look like crosses between tree-ferns and palms. Very interesting to engineers because of their lack of attention to strict speciation."

"Right," said Kay. "Will you be doing anything with hemp or cycads?"

"As a matter of fact," Gerda said, "I will."

"Which?" was all that Kay was able to say by way of follow-up.

"A bit of both," she said. "I'm not a frontline engineer, modifying small sets of genes to produce new strains of existing species. I'm more of a genomic designer—a strategist rather than a tactician. Making incremental improvements in the old staples is all very well, and there's certainly a spur of urgency driving such work right now, but the process is too much like the early development of systemic computer code—or natural selection, for that matter. It's just one quick fix after another, improvised patches gradually building up into nightmarishly confused strata. Somebody has to think on a bigger scale, and in a longer term."

Kay obviously had little or no idea what she meant, but he wasn't about to ask for enlightenment in any craven fashion. "At least you'll be working for the cause," he said. "The Heavy Metal brigade still favors engineering solutions to the problem of getting carbon dioxide out of the atmosphere and turning the methane-bomb problem into an energy-producing opportunity, and they have industry's inherited quadrillions behind them, but I'm all in favor of the natural approach. Gaia made trees to secure her own carbon balance, so that's probably the wisest way to get back to twentieth century carbon dioxide levels, if we can only make the crucial breakthrough. That's what the current work on hemp is all about, isn't it?"

Gerda flashed him a broad smile, as she always did—without always being conscious of it—before she set out to lead him up the garden path. "Hemp's old news," she told him. "It's a perfect carbon-sink crop, I suppose—it grows like wildfire, and every part of the crop is useful."

Kay knew enough to amplify that. "The fibers have always been used to make rope," he said, "but modern engineers have expanded their textile versatility marvelously. The woody shiv produces building materials—properly processed, the material is as strong as concrete. We've got several initiatives in hand to increase its use, although your mother's friends keep making smart remarks about rebuilding

the Kremlin, the Taj Mahal, the Vatican, and the White House out of matchsticks. Is that the sort of thing you're working on?"

"No. Insofar as hemp figures in my genomic schemes, it's the leaves that are the interesting part. We all know what sort of potential the leaves of *Cannabis sativa* have as brain-food."

Kay furrowed his black eyebrows at that. "I thought the engineers were trying to take the psychotropics out of the leaves," he said. "Even the industrial varieties that have been tweaked to make the leaves usable animal fodder only preserve a mild tranquilizing effect."

"That's the present situation," Gerda agreed. "All of the research to date has focused on adapting the foliage as a foodstuff or a biofuel source—but that's a bit wasteful, in my view. If we've got abundant potential already there for the production of cannabinoids, why not exploit it? That's where the wise money is going now. Give the world a better building material, and people will shake you by the hand; give them a better way to get high and they'll love you forever."

"I don't know about that," Kay said, dubiously—and accurately.

"If Gaia made trees to strike the right compositional balance in the atmosphere," Gerda told him, carefully keeping a straight face, "she must have made psychotropics to strike the right compositional balance in the noosphere. She's an all-round chill-out fan, after all."

After that exchange, Kay didn't bother to ask about the cycads, any more than he probed any deeper to find out whether Gerda really had been converted to the Gaian cause—but the cycads were, in Gerda's opinion, far more important than hemp to the cause of remaking the world. Hemp was a Gaian agent through and through: an old-school carbon sink that loved a relatively cool environment. If the newly fertile lands of northern Europe were to be planted with vast forests of genetically engineered hemp, the rains that fell on them would continue to be dutifully temperate, and the northward progress of the Creeping Tropic would be inhibited, even if it were not eventually reversed.

If Gaia were to be permanently toppled from her icy throne and replaced by a Mother with fire in her loins, in Gerda's opinion, hemp could only be awarded a peripheral role in the deicidal army, perhaps as a sly double agent. A host of new cycads, on the other hand, might well provide shock troops capable of turning the battle into a rout.

For the moment, research on cycads, like research on many other species, was being driven by anxieties about the global decline of insect populations. People who thought botany had "something to do with flowers" considered flowering plants to be one of Gaia's artistic masterstrokes, and were horrified by the thought that much of that beauty might be lost because many of the nasty insects that had long undertaken the duty of pollinating them were in danger of extinction. Flowering plants had, of course, been so outstandingly successful in the eternal war of natural selection precisely because insect pollination allowed them to range further and faster than plants relying on less agile and versatile pollination mechanisms. Where the insect-pollinated angiosperms had led, the sturdier varieties had been able to follow, including the fruit-producers that used evolutionary johnny-come-latelies like birds and mammals as seed-transmitters.

Now that the insects, birds, and mammals were all on the decline as rapid climate change took its punishing toll, the pressure on agriculturalists and genetic engineers to save the angiosperms had become intense, but the difficulty of the task was such that biotechnologists had been forced to examine the possibility of a bolder substitution, responding to a potential angiosperm die-back by introducing new and careful-

ly enhanced models of the various kinds of plants that the angiosperms had replaced, especially the most ancient: tree-ferns and cycads. The primitive nature of their genomes gave them a certain precious flexibility, which more recent species had forsaken. Cycads, in particular, seemed remarkably amenable to exotic genetic augmentation, unusually hospitable to gene-complexes transplanted from very different species, including fungi and animals. They had never made much appeal to tactical engineers because they had few economically useful properties to be enhanced, but from the viewpoint of genomic strategists they were raw clay, which might be molded into anything at all by flesh-sculptors of genius.

Gerda knew that it was the versatility of specialized angiosperms, more than any other single factor, which had facilitated Gaia's manifestation as the Snow Queen, cooling the Earth down from the much higher temperatures that had been normal when gymnosperms ruled the climate. Gerda was interested in cycads not because they might have the potential to take up slack as Gaia's favorite carbon sinks ran into difficulties, but because they might have the potential to initiate a much more profound metamorphosis in the ecosphere. For the neo-cycads, Gerda thought, the imaginable might be only the beginning. The ultimate objective of human intelligence, as she saw it, was to roll back the horizons of the presently imaginable into the realms of the previously undreamed-of—and, for that, flesh-sculptors of genius would require the proper clay.

Gerda was perfectly well aware, of course, that humankind had been a casual byproduct of Gaia's fondness for a cool throne. It was not so much that *Homo sapiens* was a mammal, designed to live in a cool environment—its ancestor-species had, after all, evolved in the tropics—but that its great leap forward, in evolutionary terms, had resulted from the sequence of Ice Ages in which Gaia had displayed her most recent wardrobe. It had been the domestication of fire—the foundation of all technology—that had allowed human beings to colonize almost the entire land surface of the globe, including such inhospitably cold regions as northern Sweden. Gerda was not prepared, however, to draw the conclusion from this intrinsic indebtedness that humankind was bound to remain Gaia's slave forever, trying loyally with all its collective might to restore the world to the climate *she* liked best.

In Gerda's view, such ecological conservatism could only lead to evolutionary petrifaction and an end to progress. If humankind were to continue to advance, it needed to evolve; to evolve, it needed new challenges, new pressures, and new opportunities.

Gaia had cooled the world down by putting carbon that had once been incorporated into living organisms into a whole series of inert deposits: coal and oil sealed up in geological strata, methane held in crystalline clathrates in permafrosts and on the sea bed. The cost of the ecosphere's cooling had, in consequence, been a massive loss of biomass: biomass that had once been embodied in species that thrived in the heat, based in jungles and swamps that must have made angiosperm-dominated rainforests look like mere kitchen gardens by comparison. There had been no deserts in those days, when it really had never rained but it poured.

Unlike Kelemen Kiss and his pusillanimous majority, Gerda Rosenhane did not want to design new carbon sinks in order to calm the atmosphere down and make the Earth cool again. She wanted to design new carbon carriers, in order to liberate all the dead carbon from Gaia's miserly hoards, to give it life again, and to restore the ecosphere to all its prodigal glory. She believed that humankind, armed with a sophisticated biotechnology, could not merely come through that transition but thrive on it, emerging stronger than before—and she also believed that if the species' statesmen would only condescend to become constructive strategists instead of mere reactive tacticians, they ought to be able to take control of the metamorphosis and guide it.

Cycads were to be her secret weapon; they had lost their first battle against the angiosperms, but the war was not yet over. With the right scientific allies, there was every chance that they might be re-equipped to take full advantage of the trouble that the angiosperms had run into as their traditional pollinators died in droves. If they were to do so, however—if the world were to be fitted out with a new and enduring heat-loving ecosphere—they would need human foot-soldiers to clear their way. Gerda knew full well that the war would first have to be won in the political arena, and that was where she intended to fight when the time was ripe.

In Gaia's cool world, however—in spite of the fact that it had now been in dire danger of becoming seriously uncool for the better part of a century—time, like fruits, did not ripen overnight.

While Gerda labored patiently and unobtrusively in Bern, Kay's career went from strength to strength. He inherited his father's seat in the Strasbourg Parliament at thirty, became EC ambassador to Beijing at thirty-three, and at thirty-six was one of the key architects of the fifty-first Global Carbon Treaty—the first one, in the estimate of many cynical observers, that actually stood a slim chance of remaining unbroken for more than a decade. By the time he turned forty he was widely known as the Hemp King, not so much because he had made billions of euros investing in hemp biotechnology, planting, and processing, as by virtue of the fact that he had become such an enthusiastic propagandist for the existential benefits of neo-cannabinoils.

When he met up with Gerda in Brussels for their private fortieth birthday celebration—he had such an elevated public profile that he had now to have an “official” one as well, although she did not—Kay was careful to give Gerda due thanks for this particular aspect of his success.

“You were absolutely right,” he told her. “Carbon sinks, polite handshakes; better highs, unconditional love.”

“Not unconditional,” she corrected him, blandly. “There’s no such thing as unconditional love in politics.”

“That’s true,” he admitted, “but the principle holds good. The utilitarian aspects of Gaia-worship will save the world, but the spiritual aspects help it to want to be saved. Good Gaians need to get their heads straight.”

“That’s a trifle glib too,” she pointed out. “Neo-cannabinols reduce appetites, in more ways than one. They enable people to be happy in consuming less and doing less, but that’s not really *the spiritual aspect of Gaia-worship*, is it?”

“You really have turned into a scientist, haven’t you?” he retorted. “Full marks for pedantry. Mind you, you were never the easiest person in the world to compliment. Perhaps I should content myself with simply saying thanks.”

“You’re welcome,” she said.

“Mind you,” he said, “we’re still running faster just to stay in the same place. The pace at which things are getting worse probably isn’t accelerating any more, but we’re going to need something new to help us turn the corner. The methane bomb hasn’t stopped ticking, and it has to be defused. If something were to trigger a massive clathrate-release, we’d really be sunk. You biotech wizards haven’t got any ingenious new algae in the pipeline, by any chance? Ideally, something that we can sow on the surface of the New Blue Ocean to help stabilize its temperature and soak up an extra measure of carbon dioxide. The Heavy Metal brigade are still pouring their inherited quadrillions into the search for a mechanical solution, of course, trying to find a mining technology that will allow them to strip the methane out and process it for use as household gas, but you know my take on the problem. Mother Gaia gave us seaweed to help keep the world in balance, so that’s probably the best way to get

the balance back again. Edible fish stocks have recovered somewhat since the CC wiped out the dolphins and all those other greedy predators, but all the reports say that the plankton are almost at the end of their tether, and that we need to rebuild the marine ecosphere from the bottom up, if we can. I've heard some good things about kelp, but I'd appreciate an off-the-record opinion from someone who isn't primarily concerned with protecting their EC funding."

"Algae aren't the answer," Gerda told him, bluntly. "I suppose Kelemen Kiss, the Kelp King, has a certain ring to it, but I wouldn't put your own hard-earned billions into it if I were you. Not that I'm an expert on algae, mind. Modern classification has excluded them from the plant kingdom, so they're not in Practical Botany's bag any more."

"You could have made billions, too, if you'd been prepared to take risks," Kay pointed out, his features briefly exhibiting what might have been a twinge of guilt. "You can't blame me for getting rich on your advice. You should have had the balls to act on it yourself."

"The comment about giving people a better high wasn't advice, Kay," Gerda told him. "It was a flippant remark—just idle rhetoric. Only politicians can't tell the difference."

He might have blushed at that had his complexion been paler, but any hint of emergent pink was lost in the bronze. "So what *is* the answer, sister mine?" he asked. "Biotechnically speaking, that is."

"There was a time," she said, "when algae pioneered the conquest of the land—but they didn't hold the lead in that particular race for long. They adapted well enough to fresh water, but the vast expanse of the primal continent required something cleverer. That's where the plants came in, and never looked back, even though they might have taken a wrong turn or two on evolution's highway. Maybe it's time to start looking back, investigating unexplored avenues of potential—or unexplored plunges of potential."

Kay took a moment or two to catch her meaning. "Oh," he said, when he had. "You mean reversion to the sea—like the poor old dolphins."

Gerda nodded. "Not a bad analogy, my love," she conceded, graciously. "Reptiles and mammals both evolved on land, participants in a selective process driven by the imperatives of land life—but both orders produced species that successfully re-adapted to life in the sea, where many of them preyed very successfully on the fish that had stayed there all along, and others became world-champion plankton-filterers. You're right—given that plants are so much cleverer than algae, why shouldn't they produce species better adapted to sea life than the algae are?"

Kay caught a glimpse of a patch of intellectual high ground and raced to occupy it. "Difficult for plants to work on the sea bed, though," he said. "Chlorophyll only works close to the surface, so that's where the green algae are, and the food-chains that depend on them; the sea-bed food-chain thrives on the dead bits that sink down."

"Trees thrive on land," Gerda said, nodding in agreement, "because there's considerable selective advantage in lifting foliage up, above the competition—but in the sea, living organisms can float. Even kelp, which often anchors itself to the bottom even in deep water, is basically a floater rather than a sturdy-boled thruster. Only corals build marine dendrites on a truly heroic scale."

"They used to," said Kay, glumly. "Almost extinct now. You reckon that could change, though, with a little help from biotech? You think plants might be able to take over the niches that corals have left vacant? You think they might take the shallows back, at least? The forests drowned by rising sea-levels don't seem to be coping very well on their own, though, and the vast increase in swampland has been disastrous for serious economic activity."

"That," said Gerda, "is because it's the wrong type of swampland. Angiosperm swamplands have always been precarious things, never capable of much in the way of versatility and aggressive expansion. Gymnosperms had a lot more practice at swamp life, especially in the days before the primal continent broke up and continental drift began to open up the deep trenches and push up the high mountains, so that much larger tracts of land dried out completely. Mother Gaia's drainage system didn't do the gymnosperms any favors, alas."

"Cycads!" Kay exclaimed, getting there at last. "I've heard good things about cycads, too. Primitive, but lots of untapped potential, according to the reports I've scanned. You think they might be able to take back the new shallows—and maybe, in time, the continental shelves—in a manner that will permit agricultural exploitation?"

"Thus far," Gerda said, as if she were merely following the meandering course of an improvised reverie, "the rise in sea levels has been an unmitigated nuisance—but it might yet provide opportunities as well as threats. With the bulk of the Antarctic ice-cap still to melt, it might be advisable to look harder at the potential opportunities. The ideal sea-bed plant, you know, isn't one that simply sends up kelp-like fronds to float on the surface. . . ."

"It's one that extends foliage above the surface," Kay continued, allowing his imagination to be gripped. "Trunk below, crown above. Algae can't do that—not without massive genetic modification, at least—but plants might be more readily adaptable . . . if only we can identify the right kinds of plant. Plants grow best on land where there's a lot of leaf litter and other organic debris in the soil . . . if marine plants were able to mop up methane from the sea-bed and dissolved carbon dioxide as well as extracting carbon dioxide from the atmosphere, they could be really useful. How easy will it be?"

"Fiendishly difficult," Gerda admitted. "Lots of problems, including the salt in the water, the destructive potential of tides and waves—but even some of those problems might be turned into opportunities, if the genomic strategists are ingenious enough."

"The reports I get," Kay mused, "keep telling me that it will take a long time to get the sea-level back down to where it was in the twentieth century, even if we can stabilize the atmospheric temperature. The next best thing, in the short term, is to find a means of making the inundated land economically viable. If it were possible to develop off-shore orchards . . . it wouldn't be much, but it would be better than nothing. What are the chances of putting living accommodation in the crowns of your sea-dwelling trees, and connecting up the individual crowns with rope-bridges or something similar? We could really do with some new rope technologies, to help maintain the price of hemp."

"It would certainly be possible for people to live in the kind of swampland I envisage," Gerda said, guardedly, "provided that they were prepared to adapt their lifestyles to the necessities of the situation. With population pressure the way it is, there'd be every incentive."

"How far away are we from initial viable product?" Kay wanted to know. "Are we talking years, decades, or centuries?"

"Decades, probably," Gerda said. "Faster, of course, if a few extra trillions of research money were diverted in that direction. It might pay off extravagantly to investors prepared to be a little bit patient."

"Is that advice, or just idle rhetoric?" he wanted to know.

"It's an off-the-record opinion from someone who isn't as unworried about her funding as you might like to believe. It isn't just money the neo-cycads need, though—they could really benefit from the services of a top class propagandist: a man with the balls to get involved on every level."

"For the sake of Mother Gaia," Kay told her, "it's worth taking the trouble."

To which Gerda said nothing at all, lest she give the game away.

Kay took the opportunity to change the subject and bring in something else that was on his agenda. "Forty's still a critical age," he observed. "More so for you than me. Responsibility urges women not to bring children into a world teetering on the brink of total ecological meltdown, but the species can't leave reproduction entirely to the irresponsible. Have you made arrangements to put some eggs in cold storage?" He was allowed to ask her questions of that personal nature, because they'd been close friends for such a long time.

"No," she said, increasing the steeliness of her gaze slightly. "Have you made some provision for your own genetic future?"

This time, there was enough pink to defeat the bronze mask. "There's not so much urgency in my case," he said. "As it happens, though, I am planning to get married this year—June, to be exact."

"Congratulations," Gerda said, including herself in the congratulations for showing no emotion at all. "Who's the lucky lady?"

Kay's lucky lady was a nice Magyar girl named Magda, who was a full ten centimeters shorter than Gerda. She did have blonde hair and blue eyes, but they were the consequence of somatic engineering rather than her natural genetic heritage. Gerda honestly couldn't see what Kay saw in her, given that, whatever it was, he had obviously never bothered to look for it in Gerda. She went to the wedding, though, and didn't cry or forget to smile.

Gerda also waited until Kay had plunged a substantial fraction of his own fortune into cycad futures, as well as persuading a substantial fraction of the Gaian Economic Priesthood to follow his lead, before she put herself forward as a candidate for the European Parliament in northern Sweden. Because Selma Rosenhane was still going strong as Kiruna's leading lady, Gerda had to run as a second string on the regional ticket, and only just squeaked home under the labyrinthine rules of the PR system. Once she was in the chamber, however, she soon began to outshine her mother as an orator, if not as a deal-maker behind the scenes.

If Selma was jealous of her daughter's sudden emergence from academic obscurity on to her own stage, she kept the feeling well-hidden. She soon began telling her daughter what a great team they made, and advising her as to what offices they might both aspire to attain, with the benefit of their combined skills and Siberian backing. The Siberian backing did not materialize, though; as soon as the Russians discovered the full extent of Gerda's radicalism, they decided that she was too far off message to be accommodated within their tactical schemes. Selma then began lecturing Gerda on the necessity to be pragmatic, and the terrible danger of taking up a position too far away from the parliamentary consensus.

"The Parliamentary consensus is rotten at the core, Mommy," Gerda told her patient advisor. "It's due for collapse, and when it does come down it'll shrivel like a burst balloon. The future lies in providing a nucleus for the new consensus that will take its place."

"You may think forty's old," Selma informed her, sternly, "But it's not. Starry-eyed ideals are all very well, but politics is the art of the possible."

"Biotechnology," Gerda told her, "is the art of the possible too—but strategic genomics is the art of the imaginable . . . and the genius of the unimaginable."

"That kind of glibness might play well to the media," Selma said, with a hostile edge to her voice, "but it doesn't wash in the back rooms where the deals are made. If you're wise, you'll let me be your guide now that you're in my world."

Gerda smiled at the time—and then ignored her mother completely. From her point of view, the decision of the Siberian Oligarchs to oppose her and isolate her within the opposition ranks was a relief and a blessing, because she didn't want to

be stuck with any of their baggage. She had no alternative but to begin her work as a propagandist within the ranks of the existing opposition, but she knew that she needed to build her own constituency in order to steer it in an entirely new direction.

There were two sets of vested interests that sprawled across the political boundary separating the confirmed anti-Gaians from the increasingly disgruntled bad Gaians, and those were the groups that would have to be captured in their entirety if the old Gaian majority were to be conclusively punctured. One set, familiarly known as the "littorals," consisted of the already dispossessed inhabitants of the inundated coastal regions and the about to be dispossessed inhabitants of the present coastal regions. The other comprised the persistent complex of old industrial interests that Kay called "the Heavy Metal brigade." Gerda set out to capture them both, beginning with the factions that were already loosely associated with the so-called opposition.

The particular neo-cycads in whose preliminary genomic design she had been involved, she told the two groups, over and over again in every possible venue and context, offered enormous potential, not merely for enhancing the economic potential of the new shallows, but also for developing the economic potential of the old shallows. They would do it not merely by producing new and useful biomass, but also by doing something that had never been done before, which would involve a new collaboration between organic and inorganic technologies, and forge a vital economic link between Big Tech and biotech, living fibers and heavy metal.

On the one hand, Gerda argued, neo-cycads could provide vast tracts of new *lebensraum* of an admittedly challenging but extremely promising sort; on the other hand, they would generate bioelectricity on a massive scale to feed and replenish the Heavy Metal brigade's ailing distribution networks. They would achieve the latter trick by taking an entirely new approach to bioelectricity generation: the conversion of tidal energy. The stout boles by which the cycads would attach their ambitious crowns to the sea-bed would not be mere supportive trunks, but would extend net-like and sail-like structures to capture a substantial fraction of the enormous energy imparted by the moon's gravity to the ocean on a twice-daily basis. The realm of human habitation would become larger than before, and its energy supply would be secured.

All of this, she assured her potential followers, was both possible and practicable. Previous attempts to develop bioelectrical facilities by generic transplantation had gone awry because natural bioelectricity was an animal monopoly, whereas commercial bioelectricity required plant-like supportive structures. That kind of ambitious hybridization had never succeeded using angiosperm stocks—but she and her former collaborators had devised a potential means of achieving the desired end in neo-cycads. Organic and inorganic technology had been estranged for far too long, and had grown accustomed to regarding one another as mere casual acquaintances, if not as enemies—but the time had come for them not merely to become friends, but to indulge in passionate intercourse. A new era was dawning.

At first, everyone thought that she was crazy. Indeed, they never actually stopped thinking that she was crazy—but they did not take long to remember how desperate they were to find some way out of the imprisoning Cubic Centimeter, or at least of making it a more comfortable confinement in which to dwell. Crazy or not, she was offering them a new hope: an alternative to yet more lectures on the Gaian vices and the need for everyone to become more virtuous.

Gaian vices and virtues did not figure in Gerda's argument at all, even in the beginning. Even then, she did not seek to conceal—although she refrained from laboring the point—that neo-cycads could not and would not flourish in a cool world. If they offered hope now, it was only because the world had already warmed sufficient-

ly to let them offer it. If they were to fulfill that hope generously, they would need to be gifted with the climatic environment that suited them best. Much more active than the trees that had driven their primitive ancestors into tiny corners of the land tens of millions of years in the past—living fast and dying young, by tree standards—the neo-cycads needed a higher ambient temperature in order to do their work, and bioelectric neo-cycads were especially thermophilic. Unlike Gaia's favorite species, and Gaia herself, neo-cycads liked it hot.

The Gaian reaction was entirely predictable. Humankind, the Gaians argued, was the species that Gaia had favored more than any other, the one that had benefited most from a relatively cool Earth whose carbon was mostly locked away in inert deposits. The new ecosphere that Gerda's radical biotech would eventually produce would be intrinsically inimical to human beings and human life; that was far too high a price to pay for effective bioelectricity. The core members of the great Gaian coalition regarded this argument as conclusive—but it failed to deliver the expected killer blow, and the coalition found itself leaking support on a serious scale for the first time in a century.

Gerda's initial support base came from the first of her two potential constituencies—not merely from the Netherlands and Belgium, whose densely packed populations had suffered greater setbacks than any other European nation from the erosions of the sea, but most extravagantly of all from Britain, the Crazy Man of Europe, whose crazy jingoists saw the potential to become an even bigger sceptered isle than before, expanding gradually but majestically into the wilderness of the North Sea until it finally reached the continental shore again.

The Heavy Metal brigade was a little slower to come aboard, even though she took great care to emphasize that it was they who could provide the definitive answer to the Gaian challenge. Heavy Metal, Gerda reminded its power brokers, often and insistently, had always taken the blame for the CC, but it was also Heavy Metal that had made it possible for at least some people—the rich—to live quite comfortably in tropical heat, by means of air conditioning. The spread of air conditioning had long been inhibited by problems of energy generation, but now that those problems were potentially soluble, there was no reason why the Heavy Metal brigade had to continue thinking in terms of air-conditioned buildings or air-conditioned domed estates.

CUSTOMER SERVICE OR SUBSCRIBER ASSISTANCE

Please direct all changes of address
and subscription questions to:



ASIMOV'S SCIENCE FICTION
6 Prowitt Street,
Norwalk, CT 06855

The time had come—or soon would come, if the political will could be mustered—to think in terms of air-conditioned cities. If the neo-cycads could be gifted with the hot-house climate they needed and deserved, then Big Tech could start fulfilling its age-old dream of building glittering crystal cities, hermetically sealed by external membranes, whose internal atmospheres could be differentiated at will from the one that the neo-cycads breathed and sustained.

Privately, Gerda did not imagine that enclosed environments would be anything more than a stop-gap solution; her belief was that the *lebensraum* offered by the neo-cycads would inevitably give rise to a new human species that would love the heat as much as they did, whether by means of genetic engineering, natural selection, or cyborgization. As a practicing politician, however, she stuck to more pragmatic issues and carefully limited imaginative horizons. She was, after all, her mother's daughter.

Gerda knew, and had always known—or at least felt—that she was bound to win in the end. The only real point at issue was how long it would take for the rotten *ancien régime* of the Gaian majority to crumble away, and for the new consensus to consolidate a step-by-step program.

Many a politician, from Moses onward, had sown the seeds of Promised Lands without living to see more than the faintest glimpse of their reality, but Gerda had always hoped that things might move faster for her, even in a world that was still essentially cool. As things eventually turned out, she was luckier than most, even though she shared the fate of many of those same visionaries in being forced to hand the reins of power over to others some time before the seeds she had sown began to germinate.

By the time Gerda's sixty-fifth birthday came around, an unholy alliance of Heavy Metal entrepreneurs, Siberian Oligarchs, and resurgent Asian Not-so-Slow Developers had hijacked her prospectus and her party—but it was her slogans that they continued pushing and polishing. She lost the battle for personal control, but she won the war.

When Gerda and Kay met up in London to celebrate their sixty-fifth birthday, seven years had passed since they had last shared such a celebration. The previous one had ended badly, after Kay had accused Gerda of betraying him, by tricking him into investing not merely his own funds but those of hundreds of his allies and acquaintances in research in neo-cycad biotechnology. He really had felt betrayed, and really had believed that she had cruelly taken him for a ride in order to pursue an agenda directly opposite to his, with no other motive but malice aforethought.

When Kay agreed, in response to her urging, that they could get together for their sixty-fifth “to talk over old times,” he still had not forgiven her, but he had accepted the inevitability of circumstance. He had not deserted the ailing rump of the old Gaian coalition, but he had accepted that he was now doomed to be a has-been, to the extent that he had ever *been* at all, within the political arena. Gerda guessed that he only felt able to face her again because he now considered that she too was a has-been, having been deposed from her various positions of nominal political authority.

“You might have won the war,” he conceded, ungraciously, “and you’ll doubtless say that all’s fair in war, and that there’s no such thing as betrayal in politics, but that’s not what rankles. We were friends—practically brother and sister. It’s the personal betrayal that I can’t stomach. You didn’t have to play me for a sucker. You could have won without doing that.”

“I didn’t play you for a sucker, my love,” she told him. “Everything I told you was true.”

“But it wasn’t the whole truth,” he pointed out. “You never said anything to me

about neo-cycads needing a higher atmospheric temperature. You let me believe that they'd be living carbon sinks, just like all the other trees we'd been planting for the last hundred years to soak up carbon emissions. You took advantage of my ignorance. You didn't have to do that. You didn't have to involve me at all. You could have left me out of it. That would have been the sisterly thing to do. When we were kids, you told me that we were two halves of the same whole—you should never have betrayed that just to score a point when we happened to end up on opposite sides of the chamber. You didn't have to oppose me, you know, back in that stupid high school debate. You could have seconded me instead. We could have worked together."

"You could have seconded me," she pointed out.

"But you were on the wrong side!" he complained. "You still are, even though you've hooked the majority with your counsel of despair. The people who've usurped your throne aren't saving the world—they're changing it out of all recognition. We could have saved it, Gerda, you and I, if we'd only joined forces in the same cause. I don't believe for a moment that neo-cycads were the only game in town, or even that your kind of booby-trapped neo-cycads were the only possible means of reclaiming the inundated shallows. We could have taken a different route entirely, biotechnologically speaking—and you should have. You didn't just betray me; you betrayed the species and the ecosphere."

"You're a tactician, Kay," Gerda told him. "I'm the strategist, remember. I'm the long-term thinker. I didn't betray you; I saved you—you just haven't realized it yet. And you did make billions out of cycad speculation—far more money than I ever did."

That shot struck home, just about—but there was no hint of a blush on Kay's slightly tightened features. "Well, yes," he admitted. "If it had only been about the money . . . but why *didn't* you make billions? Twenty-five years ago, when you gave me the tip about hemp, I thought it was because you were too cautious, too risk-averse . . . well, I have to admit to being wrong about that. So why aren't you super-rich? Why didn't you back your winner, financially as well as in the chamber?"

"It wasn't about the money, Kay, it never was."

"Just a matter of wining the war, then? I never realized that you were so intensely competitive. Sibling rivalry is a terrible thing—and we *were* practically siblings, weren't we? Only one barely functional set of parents between the two of us . . . not that Miklos and Selma ever . . . did they?"

"I don't think so," Gerda said. "Mind you, there's time yet—they're both retired from the chamber now, so they must be desperate for something to fill in time."

"Perhaps we should have invited them along—maybe fixed them up?" Kay said, obviously not meaning it. The fact that he now felt able to say something that he blatantly didn't mean seemed to Gerda to be progress. He couldn't meet her stare, though, even though an unbiased observer glancing at their table would have taken him for the stronger and younger of the two. They no longer looked uncannily alike, or even remotely similar.

"Perhaps we should have invited your ex-wife," Gerda countered, "or your son, at least."

"I haven't even let on that we're meeting," Kay confessed. "Lothar would consider it to be consorting with the enemy, cherishing the blade that stabbed me in the back."

"And Magda too?" Gerda queried.

"Oh no—she never considered you an enemy or a threat. She always understood our friendship . . . at least until you started your great crusade. Like you, she always took the trouble to point out that I had made billions out of neo-cycads, even if I hadn't fully understood what the cost of the profits would be. She was delighted to take her share—if she were here, she'd be gladly proposing toasts in your honor."

"For her," Gerda said, casually, "it was only a matter of love, not war. She must have had a markedly different notion of what was fair—even if her blonde hair was only cosmetic."

"It's red now," Kay told her. "Hot colors are back in fashion, thanks to you. Mind you, silver doesn't look too bad on you—although you might want to think of having some skin-work done." Kay's own face and forehead, needless to say, had not a wrinkle in sight.

"I'm young at heart," Gerda assured him. "Just like the New New New New World. We are up to four now, aren't we?"

"Alas, yes," he said—and then paused, apparently for reflection. Eventually, he went on: "You know, setting all joking and resentment aside, I believe that you and I really might have made a difference, as individuals. If you had only sided with me instead of reacting against me, it really might have been the salvation of the Gaian cause instead of its damnation. If only I had been able to keep you with me, instead of somehow contriving, unknowingly and unwillingly, to turn you against me. . . ."

Gerda didn't bother to point out that his manner of framing the argument was outrageously egocentric. Instead, she said: "No, Kay, we couldn't have made that sort of difference. We couldn't have made much more of a difference even if you'd sided with me instead of relentlessly following the herd. Gaia was always going to lose the war, no matter how many successful defensive actions her myrmidons completed. The neo-cycads were always bound to carry the day. The Heavy Metal brigade, the Siberian Oligarchs, and the Asian Developers were always bound to end up in bed together, running the show. The only difference I made, and the only difference I was ever capable of making, was to warm things up a little, and hurry them along."

"You must have felt rather lonely doing it," Kay observed, retreating into pensive reflection. "It's still different for a woman, isn't it? Your mother managed to have it all, though, at least until that stupid accident. Maybe you felt that no one could ever quite live up to the memory of your father."

"He was dead before I learned to talk," Gerda said. "I never knew him."

"My mother's still alive, but I've hardly ever exchanged two words with her. To me, she's just a sequence of pictures—but that didn't stop me marrying Magda."

"No," Gerda agreed. "It didn't." And it was then, oddly enough, rather than at any of the more weighty or awkward moments in the conversation, that Gerda suddenly realized that her love for Kay had cooled somewhat while she had thrown her heart and soul into her cause, and that its once-fiery passion had been transformed by time and tide into something mellower and more even-tempered. It was still most definitely there, and still unfulfilled, but it no longer felt like a dagger of glass rudely jammed into her beating heart. By the same token, she no longer hated Gaia the Snow Queen quite as much as she had before. Their conflict had, after all, merely been a difference of opinion.

"It says something for us, I suppose," Kay observed, glumly, as he raised his wine-glass in a vaguely celebratory gesture, "that we can still be friends, in spite of everything. The fact that, no matter who's won and who's lost, and no matter what becomes of the world now it's all turned upside-down, we can still hold on to something of what we had when we were six years old says something good and precious not just about us but about the world. I can still think of you as my twin sister, my inevitable counterpart."

"The world was upside-down before, my love," Gerda told him, softly. "From now on, it'll be able to right itself, slowly but surely. The deadly CC is no longer deadly—or, as they say here in dear old England, all's now well at the beloved Cricket Club."

"The trouble with you, darling," Kay replied, with a contrived sigh that was as insincere as it was insulting, "is that you never could take anything seriously." O

NATION

By Terry Pratchett

HarperCollins, \$16.99 (hc)

ISBN: 978-0-06-143301-6

Terry Pratchett pretty much single-handedly turned comic fantasy into a hot subgenre more than two decades ago, and while some of the other stars of that era have faded, Pratchett has sustained his eminence. The long and remarkably varied "Discworld" series is of course his signature contribution, but his occasional ventures into other materials—for example, *Good Omens*, in collaboration with Neil Gaiman, or the Johnny Maxwell trilogy for young readers—have shown that he's not a one-trick pony.

Pratchett's latest, begins in disaster. In England, a deadly epidemic is killing off much of the population. And in the Pacific, a huge tsunami rolls across a series of islands, orphaning Mau, a young boy who has been sent by his tribe to a neighboring island to earn his manhood. The great wave also strands an English ship on his home island—its only living occupant is Daphne, a young English woman, about his age. Almost immediately, they begin to misunderstand one another.

Each is of course a creature of the cultures they were raised in. Mau has a head full of the taboos of traditional Polynesian tribal life; Daphne, meanwhile, chafes against the conventions of upper-class Victorian society. At an early age, she was taken by her father to meetings of the Royal Society, where she gained a fair knowledge of science, including Mr. Darwin's theories. But after the death of her mother, and her father's posting to Asia to handle one of the Empire's interests, she has been under the thumb of her very conservative grandmother, who has done her best to reverse the father's efforts to

educate Daphne. Called at last to join her father in Asia, she was en route when the tsunami struck.

Nonetheless, as the only two living people on the island, they are forced to make common cause for mutual survival. Both start off with broken illusions; Mau's society has been totally shattered, and the European technology Daphne has taken for granted has failed her—symbolized by the misfire of the pistol that she tries to protect herself from Mau with.

At the same time, each has expectations of the other, aligned along gender and racial distinctions. Mau expects a woman to make beer, for example—an art Daphne has no knowledge of. (She eventually learns.) She, on the other hand, has expectations that the world will be rational and predictable, and the discovery that native "superstitions" actually work goes against her whole upbringing.

The relationship becomes more complex as other survivors of the tsunami begin to find their way to the island. First is an older man—who tries to enforce the values of the society that the wave has washed away. Eventually, the imperatives of survival overrule the demands of tradition, and from the two young people's divergent backgrounds a patchwork society emerges. The island culture is the strongest element—the environment remains what it was before the tsunami, with native plants and animals still in place, and share Mau's cultural traditions—but Daphne's blithe ignorance of the restraints means that certain previous assumptions, in particular those about sex roles, can be abandoned without significant consequences.

Eventually, there are external threats to be dealt with—cannibals from a distant island, predatory English sailors

who see Daphne as their ticket to wealth if they can return her home. The solutions to these challenges turn out to lie in the powers of the traditional gods of Mau's people—which, despite Daphne's initial skepticism and Mau's feeling of abandonment by his gods, are still potent.

Pratchett's humor is of course a significant ingredient in anything he writes. The comic elements are somewhat underplayed here, with a dry satire of the Victorian worldview. The other main target of Pratchett's wit is the equally limited tribal worldview—though, as the plot shows, there is plenty of valid knowledge outside the European compass. Still, the conclusion, in which everything is put right and all end up in their proper places in the world, is essentially the happy ending one expects of comedy.

Highly recommended, especially if for some reason you haven't picked up on Pratchett yet. Be aware, though, that *Nation*, while full of the author's wit and humor, is essentially a more serious book than "Discworld" fans might expect of Sir Terry.

THE GRAVEYARD BOOK

By Neil Gaiman

HarperCollins, \$17.99

ISBN: 978-0-06-053092-1

Gaiman has made his mark almost everywhere from comics to Hollywood, with sufficient regularity to have caught the attention of mainstream media that usually ignore SF. His latest, which won a Newbery award as best young adult book of 2008, is a good sample of how he can take very traditional fantasy material and throw it into new perspective.

Gaiman begins with his protagonist as a toddler, escaping almost by pure luck from a murderer who wipes out his family. Crawling into the nearby graveyard, he is adopted by the ghosts—and since the novel is set in England, there's a large and varied set of them. They name him Nobody Owens (after his adoptive ghostly parents)—Bod for short.

The ghosts can only protect Bod as long as he is within the graveyard fence, so

there he grows up. He is fed by Silas—who appears to be a vampire, and therefore is able to visit the nearby town, where he buys food for Bod. He also brings back books from which the boy begins to gain an education—albeit a very irregular one. With an extended family from every era of British history—including one old Roman, who is convinced things went rapidly downhill once the Empire fell—Bod gets a very skewed view of what human society must be.

Gaiman puts Bod and his ghostly guardians through a series of adventures reminiscent at times of Lovecraft, though with a lighter touch, and with the fondness for pop culture that is one of the trademarks of his work. Ghouls, night-gaunts, and the ghost of a seventeenth century witch are among the characters Bod encounters. Some are very dangerous, and at first Bod needs all the help his dead and undead friends can give him. Eventually, he learns more of the strange world he moves through, and becomes more capable of handling himself.

But the most serious threat—the one that lingers at the fringes of the story—is the man who murdered Bod's family. His name is Jack, and he wants to finish the job. He knows he can't penetrate the guards around the graveyard, but he hopes to lure Bod out to where he can have a chance at him.

And, as if by fate, the one thing that might make Bod lower his guard happens. Scarlett, a girl he met years before when she played in the graveyard, returns to town. To Bod, the renewed relationship is both an invitation to begin to take a part in the world of the living and a risk of exposure—though he is not really aware just how much danger he is in. At the same time, his friendship with Scarlett fuels an increasing desire eventually to depart from the world of the dead, despite its macabre appeal (which many young readers are likely to find attractive).

This book, according to the author's afterword, took him twenty years to finish to his satisfaction. As that might suggest,

the resonance and emotional depth of the finished product is something special, even from such an accomplished author.

THE LONG LOOK

By Richard Parks

Five Star, \$25.95 (hc)

ISBN: 978-1-59414-704-3

The first novel by Parks, a frequent contributor to this magazine, is a witty tale of wizardry in a quasi-medieval world, with characters decidedly on the gray side. As the story opens, Tymon the Black, reputedly the most evil of all wizards, and his dwarf servant Seb are on the move—in a cold, soaking rain, which the absent-minded Tymon has just noticed. They have just finished a sparse meal, the last of their food, when Tymon goes into a sort of trance. It is the Long Look: a visionary state in which the wizard learns what he is to do next.

His task this time, it turns out, is to kill a prince of one of the neighboring kingdoms. We are meet to several members of the royal families, including Ashesa, an adventurous young princess; the warlike prince Daras; and his studious younger brother Galan. Their parents, kings of neighboring lands, have decided to betroth Ashesa to Daras as a way to cement the alliance between their countries. Ashesa, something of a romantic, decides to run away. She falls into Tymon's hands, is imprisoned, and when Daras comes to rescue her, the wizard's trap closes and the prince is duly murdered.

This leaves Galan as the heir apparent; and, still hopeful of sealing the alliance, the parents decide to marry Ashesa to him. This is actually a better match, since the two are closer in temperament. But when Galan's royal father dies, he decides that he cannot take the throne until he avenges his murdered brother, and so sets out to find and kill Tymon—who is moving on, uncertain what his next “assignment” will be; the Long Look appears to have abandoned him.

Galan's hold on his throne is nowhere near as strong as he believes. An impoverished pretender to the throne, dreams of

capturing his “stolen” inheritance; and opportunistic nobles in a nearby kingdom see the pretender's cause as their way to seize power of their own. At the same time, Ashesa is nursing a deadly secret that could turn Galan against her, and endanger both the betrothal and the long-hoped-for alliance of their countries.

Parks plays entertainingly with the plot complexities, with the characters gradually learning life lessons as the world around them forces them to adjust to reality. Thus the idealistic Galan begins to learn something of statecraft. Meanwhile, Tymon and Seb squabble their way from one adventure to the next.

The odd-couple chemistry of Seb and Tymon nicely complements the relationship of the royal lovers. Another entertaining character is Ashesa's confidante Margy, who is squarely in the long tradition of older, wisecracking women who set their young charges on the right path—an update of Juliet's nurse, if you will.

The mythological underpinnings of the fantasy are exotic enough to keep the reader from guessing too easily what role the supernatural will play in the story. In short, the supernatural beings of this universe are as quirky as the human characters.

Those who enjoy the witty fantasy of Leiber, Vance, or John Brunner's *Traveler in Black* should find Parks very much to their taste. I did.

PANDEMONIUM

By Daryl Gregory

Del Rey, \$13.00 (tp)

ISBN: 978-0-345-50116-5

Gregory's first novel posits a world in many ways identical to our own—except that demonic possession is commonplace.

Del Pierce is coming into Chicago, through O'Hare airport, when he sees a man taken over by one of the demons: The Painter, who uses his power to create pictures—in this case, a rural scene of unknown significance. We learn that there are a number of demons, each consistent in its actions. And, as one might suspect, society is still trying to figure

out how to deal with them. Current treatments for possession are dangerous and ineffective—and even those “cured” are susceptible to relapses.

Del has returned to his home town to attend a conference of demonologists—academic, medical and other experts who are seeking for explanations. At the same time, there is a counter-convention—made up of what might be called demon fans, many of whom imitate the garb and actions of the better-known demons. There's also a sort of counter-counter-convention of anti-demon protestors.

Del has gotten a membership to the official convention, despite not having real credentials. He is interested in meeting a specialist who claims to have found a method to “treat” possession. But things go wrong. After a brief conversation, the specialist brushes him off, and Del goes to a con party where (in the company of Philip K. Dick!) he drinks too much and blacks out. When he wakes up, he realizes that he's gone wild during the night, trashing his room. There's worse news; the specialist has been murdered, and Del has left documents that can be traced back to him in the man's possession.

With his brother Lew's help, Del takes off—headed at first for an upstate New York town where he hopes to contact Mother Mariette O'Connell, a priest in a splinter Catholic church who's had some success in exorcising demons. Del worries that he is about to suffer a relapse from an episode of possession he experienced as a child—and he is desperate to prevent a recurrence.

At this point, things start to get really weird. Del encounters lake monsters, dodges a cult militia in black helicopters that tries to kidnap him, and we get closeup vignettes of several other demons in action. One is a railway worker who takes over trains and leads them to destruction; one relentlessly punishes impostors; one euthanizes the elderly or terminally ill. Lew and Del take off on another journey, to a place where revelations await, and the story's loose ends are spectacularly tied together.

Gregory's alternate society—obviously, turning demons loose in modern America is going to have profound effects on the day-to-day unfolding of history—is both familiar and unsettling. (To give away too many details would spoil a lot of the fun.) The book is full of allusions, overt and otherwise, to SF, comics, and fandom—Philip K. Dick is just the tip of the iceberg here. And the conclusion, while it remains faithful to the fantastic premise, has more the kind of logic of a science fiction plot than of a horror or supernatural one.

An impressive first novel—if Gregory has more like this up his sleeve, he is very much an author to keep your eyes on.

THE SHADOW YEAR

By Jeffrey Ford

Morrow, \$25.95 (hc)

ISBN: 978-0-06-123152-0

Set in Long Island in the 1960s, this tale combines nostalgia and terror, with just a taste of the fantastic.

The unnamed first-person narrator is just about to enter sixth grade. We meet his family: his mother, a wino who dabbles at painting; his hard-working, down-to-earth father; his grandparents, who live in their garage (converted to an apartment); his older brother Jim, and their younger sister Mary. There's an immediately likable sort of wackiness about them. Mary can adopt a sort of idiot-savant persona called Mickey, who can do complex math at lightning speed. Grandpa, an ex-boxer, likes to sing old songs on the mandolin. Nan, the grandmother, reads fortunes. Jim is both mentor and tormentor to the narrator, as older brothers often are.

In the basement, the brothers have built a replica of the town, using junk and discarded toys to represent the neighbors and their homes. Botch Town seems at first a kind of parody of their world; but as events begin to unfold, Botch Town takes on a kind of life of its own, with the movements of characters there predictive of the real world. The boys realize that younger sister Mary is

Advertise in the world's leading science fiction magazines with our Analog/Asimov's combined classified section. Ad rates per issue: \$2.95 per word (10 word minimum), \$125 per column inch (2.25 inch maximum). **SPECIAL INTRODUCTORY OFFER:** Buy two ads and receive a third ad FREE. Send orders to: Dell Magazines, Classified Department, 6 Prowitt St., Norwalk, CT 06855. Direct inquires to: (203) 866-8866; Fax (203) 854-5962 or email: printadvertising@dellmagazines.com

BOOKS/PUBLICATIONS

BUYING SCIENCE FICTION magazines, book collections. Will travel for large accumulations. Bowman, Box 167, Carmel, IN 46082.

Dave Creek's A GLIMPSE OF SPLENDOR. Mike Christopher, Chanda Kasmira stories. <http://www.yarddogpress.com/aglimpse.htm>

PUBLISH YOUR BOOK ONLINE, Third Millennium Publishing, a cooperative of online writers and resources, <http://3mpub.com>

A Science Fiction Webzine. Alternative Coordinates: www.ac-mag.com. \$2.00 an issue. Always a free story. Printable version available.

somewhat moving the figures around the model town, with odd foreknowledge of where the real people actually are. How does she know?

Mary's odd skill becomes important when a prowler starts haunting the neighborhood. At first he seems to be a peeping Tom, but then one of the local schoolboys disappears. The brothers believe their school friend has been murdered and his body dumped in a lake not far from their town. But there is a deeper fear: has the murderer left town, or is he lurking in wait for more victims? The brothers suspect a man in a white car they have seen driving around the neighborhood after dark. Of course, there is no way they can get anyone in authority to listen to their theories.

Ford balances the building tension of the boys' hunt for the suspected killer against the normal dramas of growing up—mean teachers, school bullies—and

BOOKS/PUBLICATIONS

THE VISITORS by V.A. Blaine \$14.95. Check/M.O.: OhlmBooks Publications Box 125 Walsenburg, CO 81089-0125. www.ohlmbooks.com

DISCOVER A NEW SCI-FI EPIC! Constellation Chronicles www.constellationchronicles.com

Check: www.barrylongyear.net Enemy Mine. All books in print.

Change Your Illusion, Save the World! <http://www.thehumanmanifestobook.com>



the popular culture of the day (pop songs, baseball, TV shows—drawn from various points in the general era, so that it's impossible to pinpoint the exact date the story takes place). He also manages to capture the character of Long Island, showing the essence of suburban life without falling back on the clichés too many writers use to trivialize it.

The Shadow Year is one of those rare fantasy books that you could easily give to a reader who doesn't normally appreciate the genre. The writing is strong, the characters are sufficiently rounded to justify independent interest, and the fantastic element, while necessary to the plot, enters the story gradually and without ever appearing so improbable that a hard-headed reader can reject it outright.

A strong performance by a highly versatile writer—Ford has won honors as a mystery writer as well as in the fantasy field. Recommended. ○

SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR

Our own Sheila Williams will be at CapClave near Washington DC, the weekend after Columbus Day; and so will I. Plan now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists, and fellow fans. For an explanation of con(vention)s, a sample of SF folksongs, and info on fanzines and clubs, send me an SASE (self-addressed, stamped #10 [business] envelope) at 10 Hill #22-L, Newark NJ 07102. The hot line is (973) 242-5999. If a machine answers (with a list of the week's cons), leave a message and I'll call back on my nickel. When writing cons, send an SASE. For free listings, tell me of your con 5 months out. Look for me at cons behind the Filthy Pierre badge, playing a musical keyboard.—Erwin S. Strauss

OCTOBER 2009

9-11—ConClave. For info, write: Box 2915, Ann Arbor MI 48106. Or phone: (973) 242-5999 (10 AM to 10 PM, not collect). (Web) conclavesf.org. (E-mail) coninfo@conclavesf.org. Con will be held in: Romulus MI (if city omitted, same as in address) at the Crowne Plaza Metro Detroit Airport. Guests will include: T.S. Taylor, astronomer Guy Consolmagno, B. Gehm.

9-11—AlbaCon. 973242-5999. albacon.org. Best Western Sovereign, Albany NY. Elizabeth Hand, Steve Hickman.

9-11—GayLaxiCon. gaylaxicon2009.org. Minneapolis MN. Margaret Weis, Andy Mangels. For gay fans and their friends.

9-11—Spooky Empire. (954) 258-7852. spookyempire.com. Wyndham Resort, Orlando FL. Horror.

11-18—Star Trek Cruise. (888) 361-5708. Sailing from Los Angeles CA. Tim Russ, G. Wang, Chase Masterson, Alan Ruck.

15-18—Con on the Cob. (330) 734-0337. cononthecob.com. Clarion Hotel, Hudson OH. Larry Elmore, Jamie Chambers.

16-18—CapClave. capclave.org. Hilton, Rockville MD. Sheila Williams, Harry Turtledove, Bob Balder of the FUMP.

16-18—Arcana. (612) 721-5959. arcanacon.com. Best Western, St. Paul MN. Kim Harrison. Theme: "The Dark Fantastic."

16-18—ValleyCon. (701) 232-8722. valleycon.com. Doublewood Inn, Fargo ND. George R.R. Martin. SF and fantasy.

16-18—Fur Fright. furfright.org. Connecticut Grand Hotel, Hartford CT. "Furry Halloween." Anthropomorphics/furries.

16-18—Autumn Dream. (661) 940-8307. autumn-dream.com. Antelope Valley Fairgrounds, Lancaster CA.

16-18—New Moon Rising. +44 (01234) 782-485. Park Inn, Northampton UK. Gatheg, Burke, Birmingham. "Twilight" media.

16-18—Festival of Fantastic Films. +44 (01617) 073-747. manchesterfantasticfilms.co.uk. Sackville St, Manchester UK.

22-25—Ohio Valley Filk Fest, 3824 Patricia Dr., Columbus OH 43220. ovff.org. Dublin OH. SF & fantasy folksinging.

22-25—OklaCon, 4801 Mackenzie Dr., Monroe OK 73160. oklacon.com. Roman Nose State Park OK. Anthropomorphics.

23-25—NecronomiCon, Box 2213, Plant City FL 33564. stonehill.org. Tampa FL. Catharine Asaro, R.L. Byers, P. Briggs.

23-25—Geek.kon, Box 5191, Madison WI 53705. Celebrating "All things geek."

23-25—The Hub, 46 Campion, Great Linford Bucks. MK14 5BH, UK. masiveevents.co.uk. Birmingham UK. Torchwood.

23-25—Motor City Nightmares. myspace.com/motorcitynightmares. Sheraton Detroit, Novi MI. Horror and SF.

29-Nov. 1—World Fantasy Con, Box 61363, Sunnyvale CA 94088. worldfantasy2009.org. Fairmount, San Jose CA. Nix.

30—VulKon, Box 551437, Ft. Lauderdale FL 33355. (954) 888-9097. vulkon.com. Hilton North, Orlando FL. Media event.

30-Nov. 1—HalloWhedon, 46 Campion, Great Linford MK14 5BH, UK. masiveevents.co.uk. London UK. Whedon's work.

30-Nov. 1—SabotenCon, 401 E. Dunbar Dr. #45, Tempe AZ 85282. sabotencon.com. Hilton, Mesa AZ. Mignona. Anime.

NOVEMBER 2009

6-8—AstronomiCon, Box 31701, Rochester NY 14603. (585) 342-4697. astronomicon.com. Radisson.

6-8—Pacific Media Expo, 914 Westwood Blvd. #586, Los Angeles CA 90024. pacificmediaexpo.com. LAX Hilton. Anime.

6-8—Chevron, 46 Campion, Great Linford MK14 5BH, UK. masiveevents.co.uk. Northampton UK. T. Higginson. Stargate.

7-8—Zenkaikon, 93 Heights Lane #7, Feasterville PA 19053. zenkaikon.com. King of Prussia PA. R. Axelrod. Anime.

7-12—Browncoat Cruise, c/o Neish, 2220 S. Alaska Ave., Provo UT 84606. browncoatcruise.com. From San Diego CA.

AUGUST 2010

5-8—North American SF Convention, c/o SAFE, 2144 B Ravenglass Pl., Raleigh NC 27612. raleighnascf2010.org.

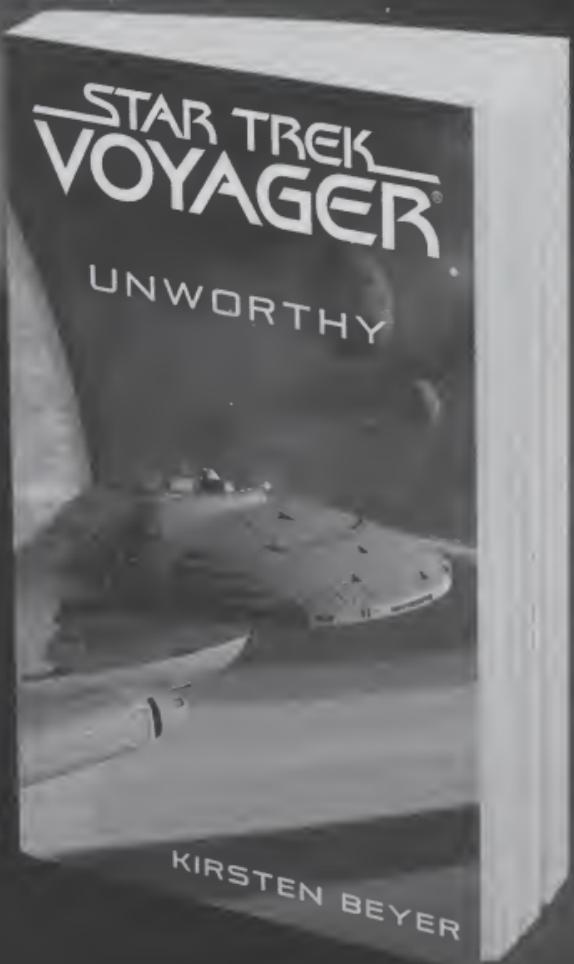
SEPTEMBER 2010

2-6—Aussiecon 4, GPO Box 1212, Melbourne VIC 3001, Australia. aussiecon4.org.au. World SF Convention. US\$175.

AUGUST 2011

17-21—Reno Worldcon, Box 13278, Portland OR 97213. rcfi.org. Reno NV. The 2011 World Science Fiction Convention.

THE GREATEST MENACE TO HUMANITY IS GONE. OR IS IT?



Leading a fleet of ships into the Delta Quadrant, *Voyager* is sent on a mission to ensure the Borg are truly gone forever. But Seven of Nine is hearing voices once again...



STAR TREK
VOYAGER

sci-fi.simonandschuster.com

Also available as an eBook.

TM, ®, & © 2009 CBS Studios Inc. STAR TREK and Related Marks and Logos are trademarks of CBS Studios Inc. All Rights Reserved.

Explore the Universe!

Visit www.analogsf.com &
www.asimovs.com

**Home of the world's leading
Science Fiction magazines**



Log on and enjoy:

★ Award-nominated
stories from the
genre's leading
authors

★ Readers' Forum

★ Excerpts of current
stories

★ SF news and events

★ Book reviews

ANALOG
SCIENCE FICTION AND FACT
www.analogsf.com

Asimov's
SCIENCE FICTION
www.asimovs.com